

PERFORMANCE AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN: THREE CONTEMPORARY  
DRAMATISTS

BY  
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by

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## PREFACE

The purpose of this study is to look at the ways in which three contemporary playwrights, Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, and Suzan-Lori Parks, participate in the continued development of African-American dramatic literature by creating texts that suggest a postmodern stance. Kennedy, Shange, and Parks accomplish black dramatic postmodernity through textual strategies that emphasize adaptive patterns of language, formal innovation, and radicalized subject matter as devices toward actualizing audience response. In addition, these playwrights attempt to address African-American identity as performative, particularly via the prism of masking, and to interrogate monolithic notions of African-American community.

The study, as a way of examining the postmodern stance of these three playwrights, begins with a historical examination of early theories and praxis of black drama, from the very first known African-American theatre group to the development of the Black Revolutionary Theatre in the decades of the 60s and 70s, noting how these theorists and playwrights paved the way for the disruptive texts of postmodern black women's drama. This examination is not intended to be comprehensive, choosing only those movements and playwrights deemed relevant to an effective understanding of the foundation for the radical works of Kennedy,



Shange, and Parks. The introduction continues by exploring Jean-François Lyotard's model of the postmodern condition as a paradigm for analysis of the works of Kennedy, Shange, and Parks, theorizing black identity and community from the perspective of a number of black female critics, and interrogating performative masking in African-American culture.

Chapter 2 examines the work of Adrienne Kennedy, in particular her recognition of tensions in form, language and characterization as resistant artistic devices in revising American racial realities. This chapter argues that because of her performance rituals grounded in distancing devices such as African-informed performative ritual, signifying language and dis-unified characterization, Kennedy, as a contemporary of the Black Revolutionary Movement, merits study as a revolutionary playwright who emphasizes personalized issues of African-American racism and sexism. The chapter argues further that Kennedy incorporates in her drama African performance rituals that challenge western ideological binaries of identity such as white/black, male/female, civilized/primitive. This discussion is informed by Kennedy's re-examination of blackface minstrelsy. Also, the chapter looks at how her radical (re)writings of the consciousness of black female characters, interruptions of unities, and experimentations with masking, form, and language create a distancing from audience which defies consumability, displacing monolithic notions of African-American individual and/or communal experience. Early works such as *Funnyhouse* of a

*Negro*, *A Rat's Mass*, *A Beast Story*, *A Lesson in Dead Language* are offered as examples of Kennedy's disruptively stark and beautiful synthesis of African and experimental American dramatic device.

Chapter 3 is an analysis of Ntozake Shange's work which is compared to Kennedy's. It suggests that Shange furthers the development of African-American performance strategies, pursuing the questioning of traditional dramatic form anticipated by Kennedy. Shange challenges, for example, the linearity, realistic characters, and climactic plot lines of black dramatic tradition through her creation of "choreopoem," through her theoretical discussions concerning the role of poetry, dance, and music, and through her innovative renditions of resistant language in African-American women's drama. The chapter discusses Shange's emphasis on the role of masking in black identity and the significance of black communal dynamics. *for colored who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuff*, *Spell #7*, and *boogie woogie landscapes* are three examples in this chapter of Shange's analysis of black, in particular female, identity and the dynamics of a diverse black community.

Chapter 4 examines the drama of Suzan-Lori Parks, as a distillation of the work of former black women dramatists into her own dramatic vision. It explores how her drama, imbedded with uncooperative complexities of form and language, is intent upon a development of a reader as Other who is established as such by Parks' acknowledging and working within the tensions between the vernacular and ideologies of the written word. *The Death of the*

*Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, *Pickling*, *Betting on the Dust Commander*, and *Devotees of the Garden of Love* are included as plays that exhibit Parks' fascination with the language of movement, the language of speech, and the language of the unyielding text.

Chapter 5 concludes the study by contextualizing the works of Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, and Suzan-Lori Parks in terms of the works of a number of contemporary black fictionalists, poets, and critics, arguing the significance of the similarities in their theories and artistic practice. The chapter at the same time works to summarize the unique qualities that distinguish these playwrights as individual artists, acknowledging that even in these differences Kennedy, Shange, and Parks seem somehow still to demonstrate a similar intent in their efforts toward disruptive texts as venues for a new black drama.

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This project examines three contemporary playwrights, Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, and Suzan-Lori Parks, as they develop theories of performance to interrogate identity and African-American community. Through adaptive language, formal innovation, and radicalized subject matter, these dramatists determine African-American drama as postmodern by addressing identity as performative and by interrogating monolithic notions of African-American community. Chapter 1 examines early black dramatic tradition and develops a theoretical framework based upon Jean-François Lyotard's discussions of the postmodern. This argument is further framed by an analysis of black feminist discourse concerning black identity. Chapter 2 analyzes the dynamics of Black Revolutionary Theatre as a trajectory toward political and social audience responsiveness that preliminarily attempts to

challenge form and language, anticipating the radicality of contemporary playwrights. Chapter 3 examines the work of Adrienne Kennedy, in particular her recognition of tensions in form, language and characterization as devices for revising concepts of American racial realities. *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, *A Rat's Mass*, *A Beast Story*, *A Lesson in Dead Language* offer examples of Kennedy's synthesis of African and experimental performance. Chapter 4 compares Ntozake Shange to Kennedy, noting Shange's further development of African-American performance strategies through "choreopoem," theory, and language innovation. *for colored who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuff*, *Spell #7*, and *boogie woogie landscapes* exemplify Shange's analysis of performance in African-American community and drama. Chapter 5 examines Suzan-Lori Parks' distillation of the work of former black women dramatists into her vision of uncooperative form and language, working within tensions between the vernacular and ideologies of the written word. *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, *Pickling*, *Betting on the Dust Commander*, and *Devotees of the Garden of Love* exhibit Parks' development of unyielding texts. These playwrights construct a tradition in black theories of performance, a dynamic part of the development of African American dramatic literary history adding to our understanding of cultural and textual politics.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, and Suzan-Lori Parks are three contemporary African-American women playwrights who have radically influenced the development of African-American dramatic tradition. Their work has incorporated a postmodern sensibility into considerations of African-American experience of racial and sexual oppressions. These playwrights have accomplished this new dimension primarily by recognizing nearly incomprehensible relations of oppressive power in dominant culture through difficult artistic renditions of presentations concerning victims of those oppressions. Their drama is defined by structurally challenging dramatic visions that encourage a displacement of traditional reader/text relationships. Such dramatic visions culminate in adaptive patterns of language, formal innovation, and radicalized subject matter as catalysts toward actualizing audience response. This study attempts to prove that Kennedy, Shange, and Parks create a postmodern perspective in black drama through these textual strategies. They accomplish this through their attempts to interrogate monolithic notions of African-American community and through their efforts to formulate African-American identity as performative, particularly via the prism of masking.

### Historical Framing

An analysis of the dialectics of early theoretical stances of black male and female dramatists/theorists will help



establish the significance of these early artists in the development of black dramatic tradition toward its current postmodern representations of black identity and community highlighted by playwrights such as Kennedy, Shange, and Parks. Questions of black community and its propensity for challenge and resistance are not a new element in black drama. Such issues have been forced upon the genre from its inception. Early African-American drama evolved into a community-based artistic medium precisely as a remedy toward the dominant culture's oppression of black artistic expression.

Perhaps one of the most powerful examples of this occurs in the first public attempt at combining African-American drama with Euro-American dramatic traditions. In 1816, with the intent of pure entertainment, Mr. William Brown<sup>1</sup> opened his own theatre group in Greenwich village which eventually became known as the African Grove Theatre.<sup>2</sup> A steward on ocean-going vessels, Brown and his circle of friends, who comprised a loose, apolitical fraternity of African-American ocean-liner stewards, were relatively well-off and sought a variety of ways to enrich their social lives. Brown began to entertain his family and friends with teas and dramatic presentations in his back yard on Sunday afternoons. Because of their success and the large number of African-Americans that attended these events, the Browns were eventually forced by the police to move their events to a larger space. From these affairs thus developed the African Grove Tea-Garden and, subsequently, the African Grove Theatre in 1821.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately because of the racial, political and economic climate in New York at the time, Brown's theater was consistently harassed by white patrons, the press, and the police. Eventually

the Grove theatre was shut down by New York Sheriff Mordicai Noah in 1822.<sup>4</sup>

A significant effect of these events is that white harassment forced this originally benign, escapist theatrical endeavor into politically resistant activity. In answer to his experience with racist harassment, Brown developed the first American "guerrilla theatre",<sup>5</sup> moving his now-outlawed theater performances from place to place, ultimately returning to the closed African Grove Theater and continuing his performances until 1823 when he disappeared from historical records. The subject matter of his work also evolved from well-wrought, imitative productions of Shakespeare and Euro-American dramatic pieces to protest drama.

Brown added abolitionist issues to Euro-American melodrama and, ultimately, composed his own and the first written and produced African-American political play, *The Drama of King Shotaway*.<sup>6</sup> Although no extant copy of this play exists,<sup>7</sup> its political implications as community-based resistance in terms of African-American dramatic tradition are significant due in part to a number of historical facts. A subtitle of the play on a playbill suggests that Brown based *King Shotaway* upon the Black Carib insurrection in St. Vincent Island in 1795. Brown claims to have written the play from his own personal knowledge of this uprising.<sup>8</sup> In the St. Vincent rebellion, Black Caribs stormed a British fort taking many lives and succeeding in ousting for one day the British. By the following day the British had routed their ranks, killing the Caribs' King Chatoyer in the confrontation.<sup>9</sup>

Brown's decision to signify<sup>10</sup> on these revolutionary events suggests a parallel to his own conflict with the New York white political and theatrical establishment and his attempt to express his anger and disgust at the reception of his work. Through the very medium he was forbidden to use, he defied the appropriation of his freedom. He was temporarily successful in challenging the economically and culturally established white theaters' monopoly on selling theatrical productions (the Blacks, of course, were relegated to the gallery in these theaters). However, as in the failure of the Caribs, Brown's theatrical revolt was brought forcefully to an end.

Although *King Shotaway* as text is no longer available for analysis, one can still derive significance from the choice of Brown's subject matter. His choice of signifying as a way of expressing the complications of his own politically racialized experience reinforces early the implications of African cultural ritual in African-American dramatic resistance traditions. In choosing to metaphorize protest against the oppression of African-Americans in a white racist society through a rewriting of a Black Carib rebellion, Brown creates through his choice of subject for *King Shotaway* an indirect commentary upon his own personal oppressed condition as an African-American playwright/director. The multiple layers of meaning implicated in his choice of subject matter for his play raises the African manner of communal confrontation through the use of metaphor, irony, and indirection.

Also, Brown's choice of revolution as subject matter for his last production indicates his ultimate comprehension of the power of racism in terms of American private and public life and of the

concomitant necessity of African-American vigilance and resistance. Brown's initial political and economic distance from the sufferings of enslaved African-Americans perhaps explains the lack of African-American resistance perceptions in his original creation of a purely entertaining form of art. It is only through a violent exposure to white racism that Brown is forced to implement, albeit most likely unconsciously, those elements of African-American resistance that served his enslaved compeers in their struggles for survival of racist oppression. Interestingly, and significantly, then, the very first formalized African-American attempt at theater could not carve out for itself a purely apolitical existence; Brown was compelled instead to exemplify through his acts the liminal nature of African-American political and cultural existence in America, and the ineluctable exaction of resistance in early African-American life.

Such an early attempt at embracing the creation of art for art's sake, and Brown's subsequent recognition and implementation of political premises and protest in his work, anticipate a dilemma that runs through a significant part of the historical development of African-American dramatic theory. Inscribed in the early search for a discrete African-American drama, the roles of beauty and utility in African-American artistic expression, although effectually blended in African art aesthetics, seem for African-American dramatists and theorists to move away from unified artistic African precepts imported by the slaves. Many argue that at these early moments art for African-Americans takes on a divided purpose, which is in Brown's case publicly acted out. This division develops into a compelling discourse on the political and aesthetic role of art, particularly African-

American drama, in representing African-American political, cultural and gendered presence in the U.S. and becomes an umbrella issue in liberation rhetoric of the period. Ironically enough, in either of these stances of beauty or utility, the presence of signification, of repetition, revision, and resistance in form and content is inscribed as a part of the African-American psyche. Art-as-art versus art-for-politics, in any case, has at its heart for these early African-American writers the conflictual perceptions of liberation as an assumed right or liberation as a political objective. This conflict sets the stage for the most far-reaching analyses with which African-American literary theorists of the period occupied themselves, the role of drama in the uplift of the race. The most recognized written formation of this controversy as an early development of black dramatic theory occurs in the critical work of two pioneers in African-American dramatic aesthetics, W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, and lays the foundation for the development of a contemporary tradition.

In the early stages of the New Negro Renaissance at the turn of the century, black male dramatists/theorists explored the question of the role of drama in African-American experience in their written analyses concerning the purposes of black theater.

Ostensibly moving away from African precepts of art as unified in beauty and utility, these theorists seemed to have rehearsed instead a European duality, a conflictual investigation of the purposes and content of drama. As a result, two schools of African-American thought are most often discussed as having developed, aesthetically splitting for the most part the Black dramatic community. The Lockeian school of drama, spearheaded by

Alain Locke and popularized by *Opportunity* magazine and the Howard University School of Drama, saw black drama as a vehicle for individual expression of beauty and truth that at the same time might celebrate the folk ways of black people. In contrast, the Du Boisian school of drama, conceived by W.E. B. Du Bois and implemented in part by the literary contests sponsored by *The Crisis* magazine, visualized black drama as a vehicle of propaganda, much like Brown's, to be used politically as a tool for uplift of the race. The literary fruits of this debate have determined a significant place for African-American drama in the development of the role of art in African-American literary tradition. Drama was a key issue in the early polemical essays on black arts aesthetics, part of a controversy that spanned decades from the first heated conflicts between Du Bois and Locke. Their opposing philosophies helped to establish a foundation for the ultimate synthesis of both aesthetics in contemporary black drama; both schools were very much concerned with the positive development of black community and black art through drama. Both had very different theories about how this could be accomplished.

In 1925 Alain Locke, an early proponent for personal experimentation of the individualist artist, examines in his article "The New Negro" the condition of the Negro masses and their self-perceptions. Locke felt that a race's perception of itself, particularly artistically, had a great deal to do with its social progress. With this in mind, Locke argues for the importance of the Negro to move away from inclinations to

focus his attention on controversial issues, to see himself in the distorted perspective of a social problem.... By shedding the old chrysalis

of the Negro problem [the Negro could] scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts.<sup>11</sup>

Locke continues by suggesting that in the "necessity for fuller, truer self-expression, [and in] the realization of the unwisdom of allowing social discrimination to segregate him mentally" (9), the American Negro needed to "rise from social disillusionment to race pride, from the sense of social debt to the responsibilities of social contribution."<sup>12</sup> For Locke, this could be more effectively accomplished through "the releasing of our talented group from the arid fields of controversy and debate to the productive fields of creative expression."<sup>13</sup>

Locke was convinced that the "talented few" could articulate the emotions of and for the masses. He develops this philosophy more specifically in his 1925 article "Negro Youth Speaks." Here Locke argues that "in the mirror of art" the "Negro youth" could foretell "in new notes and accents the maturing speech of full racial utterance."<sup>14</sup> Because of the intense influences of oppression, Locke concludes that for the Negro "even ordinary living has epic depth and lyric intensity..." thus "the Negro artist, out of the depths of his group and personal experience, has to his hand almost the conditions of a classical art."<sup>15</sup> Locke, however, argues very strongly that this art should not be overtly political in its purpose. He declares that although

the generation now in the artistic vanguard inherits the fine and dearly bought achievement of another generation of creative workmen who have been pioneers and path-breakers in the cultural development and recognition of the Negro in the arts, [the "Young Negro" artist must create and has experienced]...the happy release from the self-conscious, rhetoric, bombast, and the hampering habit of setting artistic values with primary regard for moral effect. [Thus has been created a] new aesthetic and a new

philosophy of life [employing] a lusty vigorous realism;...not merely for modernity of style, but for vital originality of substance, the young Negro writers dig deep into the racy peasant underoil of the race life.<sup>16</sup>

By 1926 Locke had published articles that implemented these principles in terms of the role of drama in the black community. In these works, he argues for a distinctive Negro drama that would work through "folk plays and other frank realisms"<sup>17</sup> and that would enrich not only Negro art but American and modern art as well.<sup>18</sup> Avoiding sentimentalism, this new drama would challenge and indict, using satire and irony instead of propagandistic speeches and type characters. His substantiation for this theory rests upon his view of the new Negro consciousness:

it is no longer true that the Negro mind is too engulfed in its own social dilemmas for control of the necessary perspective of art, or too depressed to attain the full horizons of self and social criticism.... We are at last spiritually free, and offer through art an emancipating vision to America.<sup>19</sup>

Locke perceives, finally, the pragmatic development of black drama beyond what he saw as its rather humble beginnings in protest race plays and musicals. He begins to answer more directly the claims of Du Bois that art must first and foremost politically uplift the race. In his 1926 article "The Negro and the Stage" Locke makes an oblique reference to Du Bois's philosophy of art as political when he argues for a breaking away from the internal restrictions that race plays incur:

Negro dramatic art must not only be liberated from the handicaps of external disparagement, but from its self imposed limitations. It must more and more have the courage to be original, to break with established dramatic convention of all sorts. It must have the courage to develop its



own idiom, to pour itself into new moulds; in short, to be experimental.<sup>20</sup>

By the time Locke wrote "The Drama of Negro Life" in 1926 his references to Du Bois's dramatic theory were clear:

propaganda, pro-Negro as well as anti-Negro, has scotched the dramatic potentialities of the subject [Negro life]. Especially with the few Negro playwrights has the propaganda motive worked havoc. In addition to the handicap of being out of actual touch with the theatre, they have had the dramatic motive deflected at its source. Race drama has appeared to them a matter of race vindication, and pathetically they have pushed forward their moralistic allegories or melodramatic protests as dramatic correctives and antidotes for race prejudice.<sup>21</sup>

Locke's remedy for this state of affairs is to encourage "opening up a further vein in the contemporary American drama, another step in the path of the dramatic exploration and working out of the native elements of American life."<sup>22</sup> For him the future for the drama of Negroes exists "with the development of the folk play. Negro drama must grow in its own soil and cultivate its own intrinsic elements; only in this way can it become truly organic, and cease being a rootless derivative."<sup>23</sup>

As Samuel Hay surmises, "the goal of philosopher Alain Locke's active interest in African American theatre was conversion of a smattering of protest plays and an overabundance of musical comedies into endowed theatre-training centers."<sup>24</sup> For the purpose of this dissertation, it is important to establish how his work, and Du Bois's, set into motion those requisites of form and subject against which contemporary playwrights such as Kennedy, Shange, and Parks have both measured and directed their works.

The vehement negativity of Locke and his followers toward the dramatic precepts of Du Bois might in part have been

augmented by the fact that the majority of the black playwrights of the period seemed convinced that Du Bois was correct in his view of art as a necessary political vehicle in the acquisition of social equality. It was an opinion that Du Bois had established ten years before and, as his dramatic theories developed, was quite adamant about.

As early as 1916, Du Bois had begun writing essays that acknowledged the importance of drama and art as a fundamental source of the contribution of African Americans and anticipated the impact and development of black revolutionary dramatic polemics of the 60's and 70's, exposing the necessity of political purpose in the value of black art. He argues in "The Drama Among Black Folk" that "the Negro is essentially dramatic. His greatest gift to the world has been and will be a gift of art, of appreciation and realization of beauty."<sup>25</sup> Aside from, and perhaps through, the essentialist nature of this statement, Du Bois recognizes at this early date the unusual condition of Negro drama in its unavoidable connection with race politics, and he continues in his article that

the American Negro early turned toward the theatre. Ira Aldridge, their first great actor, . . . became before his death the first of European tragedians, honored and decorated by nearly every European government. There was, of course, no career for him in America. Here by the unbending law of exclusion Negro minstrelsy developed first with white men and then with colored actors.<sup>26</sup>

Because of its inception within a racist environment, Du Bois could see no way for black drama to be separate from American politics; he felt it essential to get people to see the importance of the "development of Negro drama to teach on the one hand the colored people themselves the meaning of their history

and their rich, emotional life through a new theatre, and on the other, to reveal the Negro to the white world as a human, feeling thing."<sup>27</sup> By 1926, he had developed specific principles concerning dramatic structure and was clear about the necessities of its art in terms of African-Americans. In his article "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre," Du Bois argues for "four fundamental principles" in black drama which could create a theatre that would function for a "Negro audience desiring to see its own life depicted by its own writers and actors."<sup>28</sup> He declares that

the plays of real Negro theatre must be: 1. About us. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. By us. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. For us. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. Near us. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people. Only in this way can a real folk-play movement of American Negroes be built up.<sup>29</sup>

Du Bois had written in 1911 and succeeded in having staged in 1913 his own rather bombastic and awkward pageant "The Star of Ethiopia" as a working example of his early political conception of drama. The pageant, employing over three hundred and fifty actors, did much to show race pride. It was, he hoped, a "kind of beginning" that demonstrated "that pageantry among colored people is not only possible, but in many ways of unsurpassed beauty and can be made a means of uplift and education and the beginning of a folk drama."<sup>30</sup>

Du Bois's early perceptions concerning the theater were to develop into a powerful conceptualization of an aesthetics of black drama. By the time his 1921 article "Negro Art" was

published, he was certain of the importance of drama to the black community but not unaware of the necessity for truth in content:

Negro art is today plowing a difficult row, chiefly because we shrink at the portrayal of the truth about ourselves.... We want everything that is said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one. This is wrong and in the end harmful.... When an artist paints us he has a right to paint us whole and not ignore everything which is not as perfect as we would wish it to be. The black Shakespeare must portray his black Iagos as well as his white Othellos.... We stand today secure enough in our accomplishment and self confidence to lend the whole stern human truth about ourselves to the transforming hand and seeing eye of the Artist, white and black....<sup>31</sup>

Although Du Bois in some ways here undermines his critics' later arguments that his concern for moral purpose in drama negated his concern for artistic content, by 1926 he was answering direct attacks upon his political conceptions of art.

In his address to the 1926 Chicago conference of the N.A.A.C.P., published later that year in *The Crisis* as "Criteria of Negro Art," Du Bois plunges into a fierce analysis of the role of art in black life, making direct reference to Locke's admonishments about the lack of emphasis on truth and beauty in black political art:

such is Beauty. Its variety is infinite, its possibility is endless. In normal life all may have it and have it yet again. The world is full of it; and yet today the mass of human beings are choked away from it, and their lives distorted and made ugly.... What has this Beauty to do with the world and the right action of men? "Nothing," the artists rush to answer. They may be right. I am but an humble disciple of art and cannot presume to say. I am one who tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right. That somewhere eternal and perfect Beauty sits above Truth and Right I can conceive, but here and now and in the world

in which I work they are for me unseparated  
and inseparable.<sup>32</sup>

Du Bois points out the importance of emphasizing history in order to "face our past as a people," a past that is "taking on form, color and reality...[and that] we are beginning to be proud of."<sup>33</sup> He continues

truth is the key to this self-understanding, and, yes, Beauty as well: "It is the bounded duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty, and we must use in this work all the methods that men have used before".<sup>34</sup>

Those methods or "the tools of the artist in times gone by" include Truth, Goodness or "aspects of justice, honor and right--not for the sake of an ethical sanction but as the one true method of gaining sympathy and human interest."<sup>35</sup> Thus for Du Bois there is no denying that

all Art is propaganda and ever must be despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.<sup>36</sup>

It is necessary to point out that this distinct polarization of opinion between Locke and Du Bois is in some ways misleading.

Both men argued for a recognition of the necessity of returning to folk ways as a source and a means for the development of black drama. Both were profoundly concerned with the uplift of the race. As with Du Bois, who argues that the "the Negro is essentially dramatic,"<sup>37</sup> Locke felt that the "Negro brings to the drama the gift of a temperament."<sup>38</sup> And as Du Bois acknowledges the "inner life of [the American Negro],"<sup>39</sup> Locke insists

welcome then as is the emergence of the Negro playwright and the drama of Negro life, the promise of the most vital contribution of our

race to the theatre lies in my opinion, in the deep and unemancipated resources of the Negro actor, and the folk arts of which he is as yet only a blind and hampered exponent.<sup>40</sup>

Ultimately, the early literary debate on drama between Locke and Du Bois was an attempt to determine, as Hay puts it, "the extent to which theatre would be a cultural tool for gaining political and economic rights."<sup>41</sup> It was a beginning dialogue that engendered a growing awareness and expression of the significance of black dramatic aesthetics as an agent in the pursuit of racial uplift.<sup>42</sup>

The internal workings of this debate, however, take on a different significance in terms of the literary and political (in)visibility of women. There is an acute necessity to assert the presence of black women theorists in the development of this tradition. Male critics such as Locke and Du Bois, although they acknowledged women dramatists briefly in their criticism and through their literary magazine contests, used the accepted patriarchal pronouns and language inscribed in the liberation rhetoric of the period and looked at these women's texts only in terms of how they might uplift the race in general.

First, it must be acknowledged that Du Bois was one of the most vocal male feminists of the early twentieth century. As David Levering Lewis argues, Du Bois "reserved some of his most passionate writing for women's rights."<sup>43</sup> In his 1915 article "Woman Suffrage," Du Bois called for the ratification of women's rights to vote: "the meaning of the twentieth century is the freeing of the individual soul; the soul longest in slavery and still in the most disgusting and indefensible slavery is the soul of womanhood. God give her increased freedom in November."<sup>44</sup> But

Du Bois was most particularly interested in black women's rights. In "The Damnation of Women," a 1920 essay, he asks, "but what of black women? The world that wills to worship womankind studiously forgets its darker sisters."<sup>45</sup> He continues, "the uplift of women is, next to the problem of the color line and the peace movement, our greatest modern cause. When, now, two of these movements--woman and color--combine in one, the combination has deep meaning."<sup>46</sup> Du Bois illustrated in practice his deep concern for the plight of black women by providing a forum for black women writers. He offered numerous opportunities for publication of these women's works in his *The Crisis* magazine and acknowledged women writers in his own literary criticism.

But Du Bois seems most occupied with the way in which black women were mistreated by white males and the white world. Although he briefly observes that in the South since "the darker woman was helpless, her chivalrous and whiter mate could cast her off at his pleasure and publicly sneer at the body he had privately blasphemed," Du Bois shies away from any extensive discussion of the question of intraracial sexism, preferring to dwell on the economic and political sufferings of black men and the consequent hardships of black women and the black family.<sup>47</sup>

In spite of Du Bois' efforts on the behalf of women, the nearly invisible position of women's theoretical writings on drama suggests a male-oriented hermeneutics of black art and drama. The role of women dramatic theorists in black art aesthetics has not been addressed. In fact, women dramatists of the 1920s and 1930s through their consideration of questions of dual liberation (for those black and female) prepare the way for far more radically expressive playwrights interested in rendering

difficulties of African-American life through interrogation of form and language. In the Locke and Du Bois debate, literary form and language as devices of protest had been relatively ignored, especially in terms of the revolutionary dissection of women's issues.

Ironically enough, at the time of the emergence of African-American dramatic theory expressed mostly by male writers in publication, the number of serious plays published by black women were double those published by black men.<sup>48</sup> From 1918 to 1930 twenty-one plays were published by eleven black women playwrights.<sup>49</sup> These plays were significant not only because they dominated the African-American dramatic scene of the New Negro Renaissance but also because at least half of them addressed directly the duality of oppression experienced by black women. The dual liberation issue was presented in plays written by black women which clearly sided with Du Bois's concept of the social utility of black art for the race but were at the same time groundbreaking in that they were dramas that also looked squarely at black women's issues of oppression.

The first serious play written and produced by an African-American in this century was by a woman, Angelina Weld Grimké. Her play *Rachel*, was produced with the help of Du Bois and the N.A.A.C.P. in 1916 and published in 1920. The play is courageous in its subject matter for its time; it is radically concerned with issues of racial and, particularly, sexual liberation.

The protagonist in the play, *Rachel*, is an expressive, emotional young woman who adores children and idealizes the possibilities of family and motherhood. For her "the loveliest thing of all the lovely things in this world is just...being a



mother!" <sup>50</sup> Yet Rachel expresses an equally enthusiastic independence of spirit more than once in the play, particularly in responses to her fiancé, John Strong. She expresses, for example, such sentiments as the following to Strong: "Indeed!... I wonder if you know--how--maddening you are. Why, you talk as though my will counts for nothing. It's as if you're trying to master me. I think a domineering man is detestable."<sup>51</sup>

Her strong spirit begins to change after four years of observing her educated friends and family as they are continually unable to secure jobs because of racial oppression. And she is further disillusioned by observing the sufferings of children abused emotionally and physically by racism. A revelation that the deaths of her father and brother ten years before had been the result of a lynch mob is aggravated by the anguish of her adopted son Jimmy, suffering at the hands of white children in his first days of public school.

Rachel is ultimately driven to madness. In a final desperate act of resistance, she refuses to wed her adoring fiancé, declaring that she has no right to bring a black child into such a racially oppressive existence. She exclaims

we are all blighted; we are all accursed--all of us--everywhere, we whose skins are dark--our lives blasted by the white man's prejudice... If it nearly kills me to hear my Jimmy's crying, do you think I could stand it, when my own child, flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood--learned the same reasons for weeping?<sup>52</sup>

The play ends with a dismal scene of Rachel, alone in the dark, consoling the hysterically weeping Jimmy.

Through this text, Grimké acknowledges questions of female autonomy, motherhood and the issues of racial violence. The play is a powerful representation of Grimké's dramatic intent but was

criticized by some black critics as proposing racial suicide. This reception indicates the varied stances that existed within the black community concerning issues of race uplift and resistance. Grimké's text and its reception anticipates the continually diversified stances of African-Americans in terms of the conflicts between individual autonomy and responsibility to "the African-American community."

Interestingly enough, Grimké's concept of the power of drama in expressing the political intricacies of gender and race are even more directly presented in a little-discussed article she wrote in defense of her purpose for the play, "'Rachel,' The Play of the Month: The Reason and Synopsis by the Author," published in *The Competitor* in 1920. In this article, Grimké reveals her insight into the issues of race, gender, and dramatic theory. She courageously addresses the role of white women in the question of racist oppression, arguing that

the majority of women, everywhere, although they are beginning to awaken, form one of the most conservative elements of society. They are, therefore, opposed to changes. For this reason and for sex reasons the white women of this country are about the worst enemies with which the colored race has to contend.<sup>53</sup>

Grimké felt that one way to reach these women would be to appeal, through drama as an accessible genre, to their positions as mothers, claiming that "certainly all the noblest, finest, most sacred things in their lives converge about this. If anything can make all women sisters underneath their skins it is motherhood."<sup>54</sup>

In addition, Grimké wished to dramatize African-Americans in a positive light. Like Du Bois, she felt that, in order to encourage the uplift of the race, a positive perception of the

character of blacks was a crucial element for whites. She observes in her article that "since it has been understood that 'Rachel' preaches race suicide, I would emphasize that that was not my intention. To the contrary, the appeal was not primarily to the colored people, but to the whites."<sup>55</sup> Grimké's notion of the importance of women in drama as vehicles for interrogating racism suggests, as early as 1920, a new emphasis from black women dramatists on sexism and the role of women in racial, literary politics, in answer to the efforts of male dramatic theorists such as Du Bois and Locke.

Issues of dual liberation are central to another play published in the 1919 *Birth Control Review*.<sup>56</sup> *They That Sit in Darkness*, written by Mary Burrill, examines the paralyzing effects of black economic poverty and confronts directly the lack of availability of birth control information for poor black women as a substantial contributor to the continued cyclic, economic dependency and hardship in black families. Burrill, unlike Grimké, was comfortable with the portraiture of the common folk, resorting to dialect as a way of emphasizing a lack of education in the perpetuation of poverty in the black community.

In her play, Burrill tackles interrelated issues of race, sexuality and poverty within the experiences of black women. Malinda Jasper, an overtired mother of ten (eight living) children who has just given birth to her last child within a week, is feeling the physical repercussions of a weakened heart and of having returned to her washerwoman's job too soon after the birth. The doctor bills have continued to mount, and there is no food in the household. Melinda emphatically encourages her daughter, Lindy, to prepare for going away to school on

scholarship at Tuskegee. For Malinda, her namesake's only chance of breaking the cycle of poverty and backbreaking work is for her to leave and get an education in order to prepare her for a promised position as a country teacher and, as a result, a better future for the whole family. Lindy is Malinda's spiritual way out, "Ah ain't a-goin' be stan'in' in de way yo' gittin' dis edicashun. Yo chance don' come, Lindy, an' Ah wants ter see yuh tek it!" <sup>57</sup>

But Malinda's illness worsens as the play progresses. A visit from Nurse Shaw reveals that state law forbids Shaw from giving Malinda information about birth control, even though the nurse recognizes the costs that so many children have put upon this family:

God is not punishing you, Malinda, you are punishing yourselves by having children every year.... You must be careful...! My heart goes out to you poor people that sit in darkness, having, year after year, children that you are physically too weak to bring into the world-- children that you are unable not only to educate but even clothe and feed...the law forbids my telling what you have a right to know! <sup>58</sup>

By the end of the play, Malinda has died, and Lindy, her hopes dashed, resolutely accepts the fact that she must stay home, take over the washing tasks, household work and supervision of the seven other children in place of her mother. Thus the cycle of ignorance and poverty will continue for this next generation of women.

Significantly, the father, although described by his family as a viable, productive part of the family, working late into the night to help support the household, is never present on stage. Burrill's obvious creation of an absence of authoritative males in this play seems a reiteration of the importance of birth

control as a women's issue, emphasizing the devastating effects that uncontrolled births and poverty can continue to have on mothers and daughters, even if they themselves are aware of and attempting to change their situations. Nellie McKay argues that the play demonstrates what "the inaccessibility to certain kinds of information means for social mobility, education, self-determination, health, infant and female mortality, and economic viability." She continues

Burrill shows us...the...blame is not on the victim..., but on a system that withholds vital information and access from special groups of people because they belong to those groups that are voiceless in the world where such decisions are made.<sup>59</sup>

Most importantly, Burrill's play challenges the stereotypical view of impoverished women. Positioning these women as aware of and willing to act for change, Burrill creates a more positive image of black women, not as listless and culpable victims, but rather as pro-active, forceful individuals hoping for and working toward economic and social improvements for themselves, their families, and, ultimately, their race.

As Grimké's and Burrill's works illustrate, women playwrights of the period, in addition to their relatively prolific production and publication of plays, were not silent in terms of the development of dramatic theory. Although much of the attention for the development of early black arts aesthetics is directed toward the black male theorists of the period, black women were contributing to the arts aesthetics discourse as well, through their consistent visions of social equality, issues of family, and improved images of black women in their plays, as well as through their limited published critical discussions.

Yet little attention, particularly in terms of publishing interests seems to have been directed then or now toward the theory inherent in the drama of these women in comparison to the more published male dramatists of the period; the public reception of their works as contributing to the theory of black drama has been and continues to be minimal.<sup>60</sup> Despite these limitations, in their pursuit of a dramatic aesthetics and theory that would include issues of black women, these women playwrights attempted to establish for themselves a space for their particular kind of resistance to suffering that comes out of both interracial and intraracial sexist environments.

The significance of these early writings by African-American women playwrights and theorists exists for this project in the manner in which they created a foundation for the further development of radical structure and content in the works of contemporary women dramatists, also bent on exposing and examining complexities of African-American identity and communal experience. This historical connection becomes more visible in the complex oppositions of color and sex that surface during the development and expansion of another major period in African American drama, the Black Revolutionary Theatre Movement.

Black revolutionary dramatists in some ways embrace the requirements of African-American drama first laid out by Du Bois in his Krigwa Players manifesto. Du Bois asserted that Negro theater should be "About us...By us...For us...Near us...."<sup>61</sup> Four decades later LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka argues for much the same criteria in black revolutionary theater. Baraka is recognized by critics as the most outspoken proponent of the criteria for revolutionary black art and drama; in *Black Theatre USA*, James

Hatch describes him as being "hailed as the leader of the Revolutionary Black Arts Theatre Movement of the 1960s."<sup>62</sup> There are of course a number of other articulate, well known black dramatists who, also keeping in mind early black dramatic theory, helped to define the nature of black revolutionary theater of the 1960s and 1970s. Langston Hughes, taking up the early demands of both Locke and Du Bois, in the early 1960s calls for a specialized Afro-American theater:

if our artists are to live as artists and keep their art alive, the Negro people themselves must open up avenues of expression for them.... There is a very great need for...a theatre in which the drama and the folk arts of the Negro people might be presented before the very audiences out of whom this drama is born.... Culture must of necessity begin at home.<sup>63</sup>

Also echoing Locke and Du Bois, Ed Bullins in his "Theatre of Reality" elaborates upon Hughes' idea when he describes in 1966 a black theater coming "from cultural experience...by Negroes, concerning Negro characterization...created for a general audience."<sup>64</sup> Reiterating very closely Du Bois's position, Clayton Riley suggests in "On Black Theater" that the vision of effective black theater artists and their works is "to elaborate on the quality of blackness in this country" and to serve "a new artistic purpose...of designing art best judged by black audiences."<sup>65</sup> Ron Milner in his "Black Theater-Go Home!" effectively summarizes these views of a new black theater: "this new theater must be housed in, sustained and judged by, and be a useable projection of, and to, a black community."<sup>66</sup>

#### Prefacing Performative Refusals

In line with Baraka's dramatic premises, many of the plays of the Black Revolutionary Period worked toward black revolution in the 60's and 70's by attempting to employ the collective or

communal experiences of black people. For example, the debilitating effects of racist oppression upon the black family is a theme emphasized by many black revolutionary playwrights and investigated within traditional, realistic dramatic forms. As an example, Lonnie Elder explores issues of black family disintegration in the face of oppression in his 1965 play *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*. Although realistic in presentation, development of characters, and plot, the play still offers challenges to the systematic social and economic oppression of blacks in Harlem in the 1960s.

The conflict in the play is established between predictable black male and female characters that foster, early in the historical movement, black revolutionary stereotypical views such as revolutionary strength equated with black male virility, black women perceived as domineering, controlling shrews, the lack of alternatives in terms of the binary politically-engaged/useless-traitor-to-the-race. In the play, a father and two brothers are weak, lazy, non-revolutionary black men looking for a quick fix, and their sister is an overbearing, strong-suffering woman like her dead mother, emasculating and hampering the energies of her men. The father, Parker, and his sons, Theo and Bobby, rather than looking to political revolt, turn to the numbers and bootlegging as a way of rebelling against the limited prospects they face in the white-controlled work world. Adele, the sister, consequently succumbs to the allure and violence of the street life herself. Following a linear, climactic plot line, the play ends with none of the characters prepared to face the consequences of their alternative lifestyles; Bobby's death at the hands of authorities shatters the family. The naturalistic



quality of this play may in some ways camouflage the complexity of its tone, for this drama can not be seen as simply a morality play warning against lawlessness in the black community. It could be seen rather as an early black revolutionary exegesis on the hopelessness of family health in the face of economic racist oppression and the need for alternative solutions that offer the black community redress.

The above example supports the suggestion that the historical legacy conceived by the early black dramatic theorists establishing the requirements of black subject matter in relatively traditional dramatic form offers a strong base for playwright/theorists of the sixties in adapting black drama. Although still primarily realistic and traditional in form, revolutionary drama, like that of its Harlem Renaissance predecessors, worked toward a theater increasingly reflective of the complexities of black identity and community. And the more radical black revolutionary dramatists continued to demand even greater change for their new theater. They saw the necessity for a certain violent, didactic aesthetic in their theater of resistance. This aesthetic demanded a strategy of drama that shifted away from traditional dramatic forms which emphasized the quest to share power, and that moved, rather, toward an agit-prop drama which emphasized to audience and community the act of seizing power.<sup>67</sup>

Thus the theme of issues in the black community becomes instrumental in the development of a new revolutionary aesthetic that flirts with the impetus of form as a performative expression of revolution. Baraka's own *The Slave* is a serious study of the marred interrelationships of family which is welded to a growing

cry for political awareness and activism on the part of the audience and which anticipates contemporary analyses of black families such as Kennedy's *A Rat's Mass*, or Shange's *boogie woogie landscapes*. This play addresses the issue of innovative structure halfheartedly, but with more complexity than works of earlier playwrights such as Elder. Baraka sets up, through his addition of prologue and epilogue, a heavy-handed symbolism that equates the decline of his protagonist to the decline of the prologue spokesman-as-slave's self-worth. In this attempt toward radicalizing audience response, the play dissects the issues of a family with mixed-race children and the complexity of black and white family dynamics. Within the central portion of the play, development of theme and character borders on traditional realism. Grace, Walker's white x-wife, and her second husband, Easley, a white university professor, are confronted by Walker, who has ostensibly come to see his racially mixed children. Walker is a violent black revolutionary leader participating in a massive political rebellion of African-Americans against the white establishment. The revolution has separated Walker emotionally as well as ideologically from his wife, his former white acquaintances and friends, and from his own half-white daughters.

Here racism takes a violent form of family torture expressed straightforwardly but touching on the tortures of mixed race characters in Adrienne Kennedy's drama. Walker and his wife and children have been separated as a family by the oppressive realities of a racist culture:

Walker. I never stopped telling you I loved you...or that you were my wife!

Grace. It wasn't enough, Walker. It wasn't enough.

Walker. God, it should have been....

Grace. Walker, I was, am, white. What do you think was going through my mind every time you were at some rally or meeting whose sole purpose was to bring about the destruction of white people?

Walker. You were my wife.... I loved you. You mean because I loved you and was married to you...had had children by you, I wasn't supposed to say the things I felt. I was crying out against three hundred years of oppression; not against individuals.<sup>68</sup>

Walker cannot resign himself to the emotional complexities of having lost his wife and children while his political ideals rallied him to the violent cause of black revolution. He declares

in spite of the fact that I...promoted a bloody situation where white and black people are killing each other...;at best a war that will only change, ha, the complexion of tyranny.... I want those girls, very, very much. And I will take them out of here with me.

Grace. I left you...and took the girls because you'd gone crazy. You're crazy now. This stupid ugly killing you've started will never do anything, for anybody. And you and your people will be wiped out, you know that....

Walker. Which is still better than being freakish mulattos in a world where your father is some evil black thing you can't remember.<sup>69</sup>

We never actually see Walker's mixed-race daughters. They remain upstairs, removed from the action and dialogue. Even in the midst of revolutionary warfare and explosions, they make no sounds. In the final moments of the play, because of their potent continued silence, we are not even certain if the daughters are alive or dead, whether they have been murdered at the hands of their father, or by the bombs crashing into the roof of their home. These children in their absent presence signal the abortive complexities of racially-constructed family dynamics, formed by silences, misapprehensions. Their silence suggests sublimated stereotypical assumptions and unacknowledged racially motivated resentments that even familial love cannot overcome.

At the same time, *The Slave* creates a shrill demand for clearer consideration of radical black political action. As the structure of the play indicates, Baraka, in an attempt to rally other black revolutionary playwrights, builds upon the early, more quotidian traditional structural concerns of black drama, such as developed character or linear plot, through the creation of a prologue, and an epilogue, and through development of hyperbolic issues of family and community. He also reveals a more concerted effort toward recognizing audience by calling for a theater that would actualize an audience politically.<sup>70</sup> In his "The Revolutionary Theatre" he demands a theater that would

force change...EXPOSE!...be anti-western...a political theatre, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dim-witted fat bellied white guys...[in a phrase] a theatre of assault."<sup>71</sup>

Baraka's fervor is informed by Black Nationalist philosopher and proponent of radical black art aesthetics, Ron Karenga, who argues that "Black art must expose the enemy, praise the people, and support the revolution.... The real function of art is to make revolution, using its own medium."<sup>72</sup> This view which incorporates an awareness of the role of audience was accepted and implemented by a number of black revolutionary playwrights and dramatic theorists. For example, Ron Milner declares that "art for art's sake is incest!"<sup>73</sup> while Baraka states that "the Black Artist's role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it;"<sup>74</sup> therefore, "we must make art that will function so as to call down the actual wrath of world spirit."<sup>75</sup>

Ritual in black revolutionary theatre is another creative device somewhat restricted by the absolutist nature of Karenga's

didactic perception of art. It is acknowledged by the black revolutionary playwrights as being essential to the functional aesthetic for black revolutionary drama. To accomplish a mobilization of audience, Baraka, along with several other black revolutionary dramatists, looks to ritual in drama as an avenue of didactic protest and mobilization. Baraka's play *Dutchman's* most clearly identifiable experimental element, for example, as in the case of many other black revolutionary plays, might be its use of agit-prop repetition as ritual, a consistent didactic call for black political action in this as in other Baraka plays. Larry Neal praises Baraka's use of such ritual in Baraka's *Slave Ship*, arguing that its "energy is, at base, ritualistic.... [It is] ritualized history," a repetition and revision of black experience. He continues by defining this history as one that pushes for an emotional, almost religious, participation on the part of the audience. And, like other political performance, the purpose of Baraka's use of ritual in his texts is to make the audience aware, more prepared to take action, and, as Neal argues, "stronger, more sensitive to the historical realities that have shaped our lives and the lives of our ancestors."<sup>76</sup> In their ritualistic repetition of violence as affirmation for black racial pride and power, plays such as *Dutchman*, the revolutionaries hoped, would work to actively affect the audience, or as Baraka describes it, to

cause the blood to rush, so that pre-revolutionary temperament will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they will find themselves tensed and clenched,<sup>77</sup> even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught.

Although most plays of the Black Revolutionary Theater do not exhibit any kind of consistent formal expression of thematic

protest that might buttress this revolutionary deployment of ritual and might stretch the tenets of much of traditional dramatic conventions. However Baraka and Bullins, again as examples, did try some traditional barriers through their agit-prop, symbolic, and "simplistically allegorical plays."<sup>78</sup> These works, while attempting to acknowledge tensions and complexities that create distance from traditional realism and recognized by most critics to "have something different going on," still were relatively clear and accessible in terms of interpreting their polemical messages.<sup>79</sup>

#### Toward an Anatomy of Ritual

In his article "Notes on Ritual in the New Black Theater," Shelby Steele identifies the role of ritual for most black revolutionary dramatists. He argues that ritual singles out black theater from other American drama; what he calls the New Black Theater "represents a very severe break from contemporary American drama."<sup>80</sup> Suggesting that the ritualistic nature of black theater is one of the "most salient characteristics...that maintains its separation from mainstream American drama," Steele defines his term *ritualistic* to mean the

strong presence of *symbols, characterizations, themes and language styles* which are frequently repeated from play to play and over a period of time, with the result that easily recognized patterns are established which have the function of reaffirming the values and particular commitment of the audience for whom the plays are written.<sup>81</sup>

Steele argues that ritual produces in black drama the inscription of function, that it places black art as a form which serves the politically and culturally "peculiar needs of the black community." Consequently, drama for African-Americans should

"serve a specific function beyond itself" and thus challenge the concept of "art for art's sake."

Steele thus aligns black revolutionary drama with a view of art prominent in many African societies, "where art is cultivated only in a functional sense." He suggests that this function of black art, and black revolutionary theater, is "the development of a revolutionary and nationalistic consciousness." For black revolutionary dramatists, then, art must be functional; this view of art, Steele claims, distinguishes black revolutionary theater from contemporary American theater.<sup>82</sup>

However, such a view of the functional nature of black drama alone does not set revolutionary black theater emphatically apart from contemporary American theater, as Steele seems to suggest, especially American theater which is informed by Western European avant-garde. Emphasis on art as functional can not, in fact, be argued as a factor that distinguishes black revolutionary drama, since American avant-garde drama, echoing the European experimentalists, evidences a view of art as functional. Its effort through new forms and content is to protest and debunk American traditional theater and the ideologies that traditional theater (re)presents.

American experimental theater manifests its disapproval of Euro-American theatrical traditions by attempting to break from the conventions of realism and conservatism that construct these works. Broadway, the epitome of the traditional stage, presented a central target with its emphasis on "the glitter, glamour, and tinsel" of commercialized theater.<sup>83</sup> New forms as devices of protest establishing a specific function for drama were produced by a number of theater groups bent on creating "alternative"

drama that was "characterized by a spirit of radicalism" and that shared a "commitment to a certain idea about the function of theatre."<sup>84</sup>

As such, experimental American drama, created to reject and replace traditional American theatrical tenets, evolved, from this view of the function of drama, within such theaters groups as the New York Collaboration Theatre, the LaMama Experimental Theatre, the Open Space, and the Direct Theatre.<sup>85</sup> Even if the issues addressed by white American experimental theater were not of the same immediate political nature as the racial issues raised by black revolutionary theater, these groups still used theater as a form of protest and expressed their concerns to illuminate their vision of the wretched, absurd state of the human condition. They thus created a dramatic form that functions as art in protest through experiment.

In terms of specific Euro-American experimental playwrights, Edward Albee, for example, is one of the most well-known American avant-garde playwrights and an acknowledged mentor to Adrienne Kennedy. Albee's play *Zoo Story* provides a link between the functional concept of black revolutionary drama and that of American avant-gardists. The play explores the absurdities of human experience while breaking the boundaries of conventional tradition, yet is a simply constructed meeting between two characters in a park. Peter, a prosperous, respectable, upstanding member of the bourgeois community, and Jerry, an impoverished, schizoid outcast, meet in a public place in a confrontation designed to exorcise the complacency of a middle class bourgeois protecting himself from the absurd reality of the human condition through his reliance on social mores.



In referring to *Zoo Story* and others of his plays, Albee identifies himself with European absurdist when he describes the function of his works. He argues that his drama is a "picture of our time—as I see it" and hopes that "[it] transcends the personal and the private, and has something to do with the anguish of us all."<sup>86</sup> *Zoo Story* is one attempt by Albee to destroy the illusion that one can elude the angst of human isolation and vulnerability that all humans must face by relying on bourgeois social constructs as a protective barrier from these basic human truths. The play is in many ways similar to Baraka's *Dutchman*. In Baraka's play, as mentioned above, the two characters confront one another in a public subway; their meeting is a commentary on the absurdly wretched condition of black Americans and a catalyst to the realization for Clay that his acceptance and rehearsal of white bourgeois values and social behaviors cannot protect him from those realities in a racist American society. The use of a ritual of protest and violent revelation in both this play and Albee's *Zoo Story* shows a likeness for these two authors in their perception of art as functional.

If the perception of ritual in black drama comes through repetitious patterns of symbols, language styles, themes and characterizations, as Steele suggests, then the argument that use of ritual sets this drama apart again is unconvincing. Repetitious patterns of these qualities also can be recognized in just about any consistent traditionalized use of drama. European avant-gardists could also be said to use their own patterns of symbol, the absurd, the surreal, as ritual in Steele's terms, repeating these devices again and again in any number of their plays. And in terms of political purpose, French experimental

dramatists utilized ritual patterns in an attempt to actualize their audiences to rebel against the social strictures of their time--see Chapter Three for further discussion of French experimentalism.

What sets Steele's definition apart from the realm of avant-garde drama, even though he does not seem to emphasize the point, is his observation concerning the way in which ritual could be used in black theater less as formulaic protest in order to reshape the purposes of traditional drama and the ontological positionings it represents, but, when combined with racial issues, more as an identification of the hostile nature of the black American's political and social condition. Ritual could operate then as a means to reaffirm black selfhood and to encourage cultural and political commitment of a black audience as a way of solving their racial dilemma. Ron Milner touches upon this distinction in his description of a new black theater that is a "ritualized reflection and projection of a unique and particular way of being, born of the unique and particular conditioning of Black people."<sup>87</sup> Such distinction perhaps expresses the clearest difference in the possible effect of ritualistic function for the black revolutionary dramatists, as opposed to that of the avant-gardists, and suggests the beginning of looking at form as a performative tool in the expression of black communal experience. The positive nature of cultural ritual here can function not only as a device of change but also as a reaffirmation and celebration of certain pre-existing characteristics in the African-American community, a consequence in keeping with precepts of African performance ritual and

sharply in opposition to the nihilistic perspective of European avant-garde.

Although Steele again does not directly address this issue, the connection to African art that black revolutionary theater has is in some ways direct and manifest and in other ways incomplete. The Black Arts Movement has reflected a close interest in African art aesthetics, in particular African ritual. Yet despite black revolutionary dramatists' ostensible recognition and rehearsal of the cultural intent inherent in African ritual, African art aesthetics were adapted by the Black Revolutionary Theater and limited primarily to propagandistic development of agit-prop drama. Baraka substantiates this adaptation of African art in his observation that

it is not an African art American Negroes are responsible for, but an American one. The traditions of Africa must be utilized within the culture of the American Negro where they actually exist, and not because of a defensive rationalization about the worth of one's ancestors or an attempt to capitalize on the recent eminence of the "new" African nations.... The paradox of the American Negro experience is that it is a separate experience, but inseparable from the complete fabric of American life.<sup>88</sup>

The functional nature of ritual for black revolutionary dramatists existed then in its perceived power to mobilize black audiences to "scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in agony."<sup>89</sup>

What is significant about this perception of dramatic ritual is its difference from the manner in which Kennedy, Shange, and Parks employ ritual as repetition and revision, or signification, in their plays. When juxtaposed to the use of ritual and language in the work of these three playwrights, black revolutionary dramatists' conception and use of ritual demonstrate their

underestimation of the application of ritual, form, and language as analytical, disruptive, and perhaps affirming devices effective in expressing black identity and community. Yet black revolutionary dramatists' attempts at ritual as an alternative application of drama, even as pure polemics, does anticipate the innovative formal drama of Kennedy, Shange, and Parks.

An inability to go beyond function as political revolution toward analysis of individual experience or to make a concerted effort toward revolutionizing form as well as content is perhaps more than anything what limits or dates the revolutionary works of many of these playwrights of the 1960s and 1970s. Their loss of immediacy was not due necessarily to the radical messages and values purported by black revolutionaries; these are still very much relevant to many of the issues facing African-Americans today. The same messages are still forcefully pouring out of the poetry of the East and West coast rap/hip-hop in this last decade of the twentieth century. Much more likely a loss of immediacy is due to the Black Revolutionary Theater's ultimate interpretation and use of ritual more as political bludgeon, with much less emphasis on recognition of ritual as a self-perpetuating empowerment of communal strengths and identities.

The work of Kennedy, Shange, and Parks, on the other hand, pulls away from the openly didactic nature of black revolutionary playwrights. Like the revolutionary dramatists, they use experimentation in theme, but they also emphasize as fundamental, form and language that rebels against traditional Euro-American drama primarily in order to protest American racial oppression, to illuminate issues of sexism, and to evoke an active response on the part of black audiences. Their experiments far exceed the

ritualistic repetition of themes of revolt or simplistic attempts at allegory; these women strive to allow the forms of their works--particularly fractured characterizations, transgressions of traditional form, and innovative use of language--to express very personal, displacing views of black identity and community. Kennedy, Shange, and Parks, through their emphasis on personal experience and their disruptions of ideological narratives constructed by black revolutionary rhetoric, do not allow their work to be limited by the often heavy-handed, almost formulaic propagandistic contextual demands of their black revolutionary contemporaries and predecessors. But there is much in these playwrights' works which connects them to contemporary black revolutionary dramatists in terms of theme, most clearly a concern for racist destruction of the black individual and community, undeniable connections with the past, and social revolutionary protest. Yet in their avoidance of the didactic nature of the black arts movement, Kennedy, Shange, and Parks are still able to create brutally honest protest against racial issues through their own lyrical and violent mystifications of the nature of black identity and community.

#### Theoretical Framing

While the content of early black women playwrights' works was often groundbreaking in treating black women's issues, most of their texts--other than in rare examples of radicalized form and content of the period like Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower*--remained predictably traditional in form. Although understandably so in such an early period of development of black dramatic aesthetics, these plays offered little formal challenge to audience/reader concerning dynamics of drama/spectator.

For example, as mentioned earlier, Angelina Weld Grimké's play *Rachel*, was bold for its time in its treatment of gender as well as race issues. But it was also predictable, sentimental and melodramatic in its substance. Much influenced by the exigencies of bourgeois behavior, Grimké was concerned with popular reception of her text, characters, and language. In her prescription for drama, black characterization needed to address the necessity of "taste and refinement...[with characters] well-educated, cultivated and cultured, well-mannered and moral...[who] do not talk...in the Negro dialect."<sup>90</sup> Grimké substantiates her theory of character, arguing

it is possible that ...[an obsequious] type is to be found among the colored people; but if the white man is honest and observant he will have to acknowledge that the same type can be duplicated in his own race. Human nature, after all, is the same.... I drew my characters, then, from the best type of colored people.<sup>91</sup>

In addition to her troublesome, unquestioning acceptance of the necessity for African-Americans to earn white approval, Grimké notably displays here her perceptions of human character as shaped by an unacknowledged class bias and her approbation of traditional development of dramatic characterization.

As a result of such traditional tendencies in their renditions of black life, these texts often evoked passive audience response centered on the "bad" in oppression, an often disapproving, yet resigned, recognition of the suffering of African-American men, women, and children. Conventionality in these early dramatic texts sequestered them within the realm of the protest drama, offering no terrain for disruptive, active transformation of audience/reader perception or affective impact on audience as community.

However, it must be re-emphasized that these early playwrights through their courageous attempts at confronting the struggles of black family or community, and, in particular, black women, have provided the groundwork for a developing trajectory of defiant drama in their examinations of gender issues within larger configurations of oppression experienced by black communities. From these early beginnings, also, derive the innovations concerning gender of more recent dramatists such as Kennedy, Shange, and Parks. For these three dramatists, cultural and political resistance has not only been about racial and economic oppression, but also about the added dimension of sexual oppression. And the inaccessibility, the lack of consumability created by the dramatic strategies in these playwrights' texts-- Kennedy's language of ritual litany, her inaccessible characterizations, and a-linear structure; Shange's choreopoem as formal innovation and her language experiments; Parks' evocative attempts at alienation through form and language--reflect the difficulties of African-American women's cultural experience. Consumability is equated here with a notion of monolithic African-American experience and a consequent re-inscription of racist, sexist ideologies inherent in broadly stroked narratives of racial suffering. For the purposes of this study, the challenge of such narratives by these playwrights is perhaps most adeptly framed within the considerations of Jean-François Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Condition*.<sup>92</sup>

Lyotard argues that the postmodern

puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in

order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.<sup>93</sup>

In the case of African-American drama, the unrepresentable is perhaps that aspect of black experience which has not and in some ways cannot be arrived at through "race drama" which attempts through imitation of traditional form, or through protest (such as black drama from the first half of the twentieth century), through polemics and revolutionary rhetoric (as in the case of black revolutionary theater), or even through the disruptive texts of playwrights such as Kennedy, Shange, and Parks. Although these three playwrights attempt to address the personal, the individualized angst inscribed in the experiences of those trapped in African-American political, social, and gendered realities through denial of "good forms" and disruptions of "the consensus of taste,"<sup>94</sup> a certain nexus of ultimate inaccessibility, of ambiguity in their texts performs or in some way presents the unknowable of victimization. Textual difficulty here goes beyond simple intellectual challenge or unruliness. It establishes rather in some ways a new framework from which to begin to examine, without ever completely reaching, multiplicities of power relations that operate within/constitute racism and sexism in America and the incomprehensibly complex consequences of those relations. In attempting to work from within new frameworks, these women defy the "familiar categories," the "preestablished rules." In so doing they "formulate the rules of what will have been done,"<sup>95</sup> slipping past ever having arrived at fully confronting, let alone representing, the crises of black identity and community perpetuated by oppression.



Still the radicality and the individualistic impulses of their works drive these playwrights towards a disruption of monolithic images of black art. In these acts of disruptive art is inscribed a similar disruption of monolithic notions of African-American experience. As such, these playwrights rehearse what Lyotard terms a "displacement in the games" of language and culture.<sup>96</sup> If the postmodern is an "incredulity toward metanarratives,"<sup>97</sup> then the dramas of Kennedy, Shange, and Parks work within the postmodern as they interrogate American cultural narratives which generalize black family and communal experience, which equate freedom and equality with manhood, which attempt to neatly characterize the emotional, physical, and sexual dimensions of all black men and women. These playwrights respond by examining the dynamics of African-American community, and by attempting to address African-American identity as performative, particularly via the prism of masking.

#### Black Women Theorizing Identity and Community

Identity has been of particular interest to many black female artists, critics and theorists. And in examining the roles and positioning of black women, such authors seem compelled to also include issues of black community. Some of these women theorists relevant to this argument are Hazel Carby, Angela Davis, Toni Cade (Bambara), Mary Helen Washington, Alice Walker. Hazel Carby in *Reconstructing Womanhood* looks at the identity of black women formulated within the crushing racial and gendered contexts of early American expectations of womanhood. She argues that "black women [have] had to confront the dominant domestic ideologies and literary conventions of womanhood which excluded them from the definition of 'woman.'" Carby celebrates the

manner in which black women have responded with strength of character and courage to such exclusion as they "adopted, adapted, and transformed..." ideologies of womanhood "to effectively represent the material conditions of black women," their daughters, and their families. Carby also investigates the role of black female intellectuals in reconstructing "the sexual ideologies of the nineteenth century to produce an alternative discourse of black womanhood." In this context she recognizes not only the importance of the contemporary "new black women's renaissance" but the necessity of acknowledging the role of an "earlier and perhaps more politically resonant renaissance" of black women writers and intellectuals in order to "rethink the cultural politics of black women."<sup>98</sup>

Angela Davis explores black female issues of identity and community in much the same manner, examining the legacy of slavery as one major force that needs to be considered when looking at the "multidimensional role of Black women" in family and community. She argues that "lessons can be gleaned from the slave era which shed light upon Black women's and all women's current battle for emancipation."<sup>99</sup> Davis continues that black women's roles were measured against those of white women:

judged by the evolving nineteenth-century ideology of femininity, which emphasized women's roles as nurturing mothers and gentle companions and housekeepers for their husbands, Black women were practically anomalies.... As slaves, compulsory labor overshadowed every other aspect of women's existence.<sup>100</sup>

Since, "proportionately, more black women have always worked outside their homes than have their white sisters," Davis concludes that in order to more effectively comprehend the development of black female self-perception and place in the

black community, the "starting point for any exploration of black women's lives" should be with their experience as slaves and with an "appraisal of their role as workers."

Toni Cade (Bambara) insists upon viewing black (female) identity in terms of psychology and history. She argues that black identity has always been regarded differently from mainstream essentialist images of personality and behavior which characterize the subject of woman, for example, as working toward sexual attractiveness and emphasis on home and family. She argues that even today women who demand more are still often seen as "immature," "anti-social," or "masculine."<sup>101</sup> In reference to identity within black communities, in particular those of black women, Cade (Bambara) questions psychological interpretations that purposefully shift away from the norm, arguing that

the reports get murky, for they usually clump the men and women together and focus so heavily on what white people have done to the psyches of Blacks, that what Blacks have done to and for themselves is overlooked, and what distinguishes the men from the women forgotten.<sup>102</sup>

Such murkiness, she concludes, accounts for consistently misunderstood positions to which most African-Americans, as individuals and as community, are relegated within white social and individual psyches. Cade argues that black women are attempting to overcome these perceptions through voice. They are attempting to

piece together an "overview," and overview of ourselves too long lost among the bills of sale and letters of transit; part of their effort to deal with the reality of being Black and living in twentieth century America--a country that has more respect for the value of property than the quality of life, a country that has never valued Black life as dear, a country that regards its women as its monsters,

celebrating wherever possible the predatory coquette and the carnivorous mother.<sup>103</sup>

For Cade, black women who are working toward finding voice have varied visions of black women and black communities. Accordingly, some women writers are

not so much concerned with demanding rights as they are in clarifying issues; some demand rights as Blacks first, women second. Oddly enough, it is necessary to point out what should be obvious—Black women are individuals too.<sup>104</sup>

Within the framework of black women's theory, issues of community are never secondary; the interaction between black men and women is primarily framed within a discussion of a need to unify black community towards a common goal of economic and social liberation. Furthermore, to many black women authors the struggle against oppression seems undermined by sexism within the black community. For example, Toni Cade (Bambara) argues that because "we have not been immune to the conditioning; we are just as jammed in the rigid confines of...basically socially contrived roles," and as a result not much has changed in the perceptions of roles in the black community in terms of the "acidic tension that exists between Black men and Black women

we are still abusing each other, aborting each other's nature—in the teeth of experiences both personal and historical that should alert us to the horror of a situation, we profess to be about liberation but behave in a constricting manner; we rap about being correct but ignore the danger of having one half of our population regard the other with such condescension and perhaps fear that that half finds it necessary to "reclaim his manhood" by denying her peoplehood. Perhaps we need to let go of all notions of manhood and femininity and concentrate on Blackhood.<sup>105</sup>

The only strategy that Cade sees in response to such communal division is a concerted effort to "check out everything that is characteristic of the Black Community and examine it for health

or disease," and raise questions in response to this analysis. She argues for such "raise them we must if we are to fashion a natural sense of self, if we are to develop harmonious relationships with each other."<sup>106</sup>

Cade's declaration clarifies the impetus behind the many versions of black women's search to explain and express the experiences of black community and, particularly, of themselves. As Mary Helen Washington observes, black women intellectuals, critics and writers

represent black women in a variety of roles—as mothers, as daughters, as artists and writers, as wives, as domestic workers and teachers, as college students and world travelers, as beauticians, actresses; as subjects acting in history, as agents in their own lives.<sup>107</sup>

According to Washington, through such diverse positions these women have "chosen to tell their stories and to use language in certain ways..."<sup>108</sup> and in so doing both celebrate individual black experience while asserting community. They

speak not just for the individual but for a community. They reflect the community's feelings and they take strength from these connections. This is the language of resistance because it reasserts a community which the dominant culture seeks to control and silence.<sup>109</sup>

However, Washington's reference to "a community" is not without a subtext. In speaking for black community, she argues, black women writers insist on treating subjects "generated by the politics of feminism and by feminist movements." Theirs is a rendition of black experience that has "revised the lives and art of black women." From such efforts these writers have diversified images of black community and have developed the "most complex images of black women in all of American literature" by making "black women central to their narratives." Through their stories

"they have critiqued the racist and sexist practices of the dominant culture," and, ultimately, have "revised American literature...."<sup>110</sup>

Alice Walker further clarifies the role of feminism for black women. In her "womanist" theory she describes a "black feminist or feminist of color" who has an identity steeped in strength which can allow her to be "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful." This feminist would not, however, separate herself from the needs of community, for she is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health. Traditionally universalist."<sup>111</sup> Walker offers here a strong position on the importance of emphasizing for black women a sense of responsibility to both self and the community, a significant shift away from much white feminist rhetoric.

These black women theorists have developed arguments that are in keeping with the efforts of Kennedy, Shange, and Parks as they address issues of African-American identity and community. Yet, these playwrights go even further in their attempts to displace assumed narratives of black experience through their emphasis on deploying radical textual devices as vehicles for the concerns of black women and community. In a concerted thrust toward the performative potential of alienating texts in the examination of black identity, particularly black female identity, as performance, Kennedy, Shange, and Parks re-present subjectivities marked by race and sex using inaccessible or masked texts. As such, they develop formal tensions in their art to iterate as well as interrogate liminal spaces within American social communities.

### Theorizing the Mask

The concept of masking in the context of this project requires analysis on three levels: the personal, the communal, and the textual. Personal acts of masking are of course immediately bound up in questions of individual identity and can perhaps first be approached in terms of African-American experience through W.E.B. Du Bois's analysis of African-American identity:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world,--a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>112</sup>

Concomitant with this dichotomized sensibility is the necessity for protective concealment as a way of maneuvering within racist ideologies of black identity. Masking then becomes an extension of Du Bois's veil. Masking as it will be used in this argument can be defined as that African-American socio/cultural capability which allows for confusing or refusing in any number of ways the direct approach to understanding or, ultimately, appropriation of an individual's sovereign cultural space by those from the outside. Physical, emotional, linguistic or psychological, such masking can include the way a subject walks, dresses, speaks, eats, communicates, writes, and performs identities as part of a particular community.

In reference to masking as a communal activity, Henry Louis Gates attempts to shape for us in his *Signifying Monkey* an almost

socio-anthropological view of how revisions and refusals grounded the legacy of African-American literary and dramatic traditions. Concerning the radicality of African-American cultural performance, Gates argues that in signification, or adaptive repetition, "a simultaneous, but negated, parallel discursive (ontological, political) universe exists within the larger white discursive universe... [It is where] black and white semantic fields collide."<sup>113</sup> As such, African-American signification within the larger context of white discourse becomes one example of confrontation between the two cultures and the first level of African-American cultural survival. The art of signification in African-American culture as an empowering force "turns upon the free play of language itself, upon the displacement of meanings, precisely because it draws attention to the force of the signifier."<sup>114</sup> According to John Blassingame, African-American signification derived from infusions in cultural performance of the "African's use of metaphor, indirection, insult, irony and praise,"<sup>115</sup> working as African-American defensive cultural adaptations for survival of the community. Such devices can be effectively referred to as operatives of masking and are fundamental to the examination of the resistant performative nature of black communal life. Although not as recognized in terms of politically subversive acts as say the Nat Turner Rebellion or the development of the Underground Railroad, masking as a major African-American performative derivation became during and after the American era of slavery perhaps the most effective bases for African-American cultural social resistance, (re)formation, and preservation, or as William Piersen observes



"more to African-American resistance than flight or suicidal violence."<sup>116</sup> As Piersen observes in his *Black Legacy*

we have too often missed intellectual resistance [of slaves] because we were blinded by a national predilection for physical violence. Valuing the brute force of isolated rebellions, we overlooked more civilized and more common forms of social pressure based on the African predisposition for wry humor and verbal cleverness.<sup>117</sup>

As a source of and example for African-American oral precocity, for example, West African tradition allowed for oral satire as a way of communal control. According to Piersen this was accomplished as the

villagers all traditionally wielded satirical songs against abuses by neighbors, relatives, great men, and rulers.... The songs were especially useful in fostering social harmony because they permitted socially approved criticism without fostering unpleasant and dangerous personal, face-to-face confrontations.<sup>118</sup>

This recognition of the redemptive, communal value of satire can be seen rehearsed again and again in such forms as African-American trickster tales, or cake-walks, or early plantation origins of minstrelsy.<sup>119</sup>

Early African-American folk tales exhibit effectively, as well, the communal appropriation of these subversive qualities of masking and African ritual performance for the purpose of cultural survival. Some of these tales rehearse, for example, Yoruba ritual texts. Reiterating the view of ritual satire as a vehicle of communal survival, African Yoruba society placed ritual text as essential to the construction and expression of the forward journey through life for an individual within the community. The ritual text *Ifa*, according to Jackson, gave to the Yoruban individual "both proverb and proscription, divine

performance and divine 'writing' to assist in ordering the chaos of incomplete knowledge of the world." From such beginnings Africans of many parts of the continent came together to create new African communities in America, in part shaping and forming through culturally resistant communal performances in their tales, a new ordering of their world, a kind of masking both signifying and subversive in its nature and culturally preservative in its eventuality.

Masking tales were precursors for writings like Zora Neale Hurston's "Daddy Mention" narratives, such as "Daddy Mention's Escape" or "Daddy Mention and the Mule" or Langston Hughes's "Jesse B. Simple" vignettes, such as "Temptation," "Family Tree," or "Race Relations." These tales evolved from the telling and retelling of Americanized African trickster tales and the rehearsal in them of African wisdom, humor, oxymoron, irony, satire and double entendre. For example, in a number of "Daddy Mention" stories, Zora Neale Hurston rehearses the complexities of the African trickster figure in African-American southern folktales.<sup>120</sup>

A simpler version of African-American wry humor offered by Hurston can be found in "Rockefeller and Ford."

Once John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford was woofing at each other. Rockefeller told Henry Ford he could build a solid gold road around the world. Henry Ford told him if he would he would look at it and see if he liked it, and if he did he would buy it and put one of his tin lizzies on it.<sup>121</sup>

This quick tale rehearses the dozens, elements of one-up-manship, exaggeration, boasting, and establishes a fundamental respect for verbal agility and practicality. Commencing with a recognition of Rockefeller and Ford as symbols of power residing in whiteness

and wealth, the teller of the tale at the same moment establishes a sense of intimacy and familiarity toward these men. Describing Rockefeller's and Ford's discussion through the vernacular verb form "woofing" (a synonym for "signifying" or verbal competition), the teller casts their conversation into a cultural pattern outside of the two wealthy men's experiences. This sets up the incongruence of the tale and the humor of its outcome. Although both men speak of a power not accessible to the teller of the tale, Rockefeller and Ford are rehearsing an African-American cultural performance in their "woofing" about what their wealth can accomplish. This temporarily destabilizes their material power by emphasizing the momentarily more powerful nature of verbal complexity, which must rightly be recognized as a valid, though masked and ultimately improbable, effort toward preserving the worth of individual creativity or intellectual wit over physical and political power. Oral performance here celebrates the value of communal ritual and revision and reiterates them as necessities in the survival of the African-American individual and community within a larger oppressive society.

Deriving from these communal frames operative in the African-American social culture, masking is inherently a significant part of African-American artistic forms. As black theorists have acknowledged, resistance tradition in African-American literature can be described as having derived from the development of repetition, revision, and refusal. Again, Henry Louis Gates argues

black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished the double play that these forms bore to white forms. Repetition and revision are

fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use. I decided to analyze the nature and function of Signifyin(g) precisely because it is repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference. Whatever is black about black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black Signifyin(g) difference.<sup>122</sup>

And a synthesis of repetition and revision with the performative renditions of masking anticipates, in particular, the special possibilities inherent in the combined written/acted out disposition of drama.

The distinguishing nature of the genre of drama is that it offers a venue for, and at the same time, is performance; thus drama rehearses the workings of masking in a most direct form through the added dimensions of stage, actor, and spectator. In black drama, performance/masking has been historically displaced and displacing. According to Michael Cooke, in black plays the act of acting is effectively interrogated in the staged moment, reminiscent, for instance, in the reflexivity of minstrelsy--a fundamental, yet troublesome, formulation in the history of black drama.<sup>123</sup>

Minstrelsy is key to any discussion of masking in African-American drama. Eric Lott, in *Love and Theft*, does not so much emphasize the origin of minstrelsy in plantation black life, but rather sees it as coming out of northern working class white observers' distant, perverted perceptions of northern blacks. He argues that

in *Black Manhattan*, James Weldon Johnson...remarked that minstrelsy originated on the plantation, and constituted the 'only completely original contribution' of America to the theater. These judgements appear terribly misguided now, given that blackface minstrelsy's century-long commercial regulation of black cultural practices stalled the development of African-American public art and generated an enduring narrative of racist ideology.<sup>124</sup>

Lott characterizes minstrelsy in terms of the "racial politics of its time" and as having emerged as a "northern entr'acte in about 1830."<sup>125</sup> Piersen, from a slightly different stance, sees for minstrelsy an origin in black folk art, arguing that

minstrelsy was a clear example of white performers taking over black southern music and black style of performance...[pandering] the folk style of the plantation slaves into popular art form that kept much of the sound and humor of black music but demeaned and prostituted the source. The upbeat melodies remained, but the biting satire directed against whites was reversed.<sup>126</sup>

Lott's and Piersen's views are in keeping with my perceptions of early developments of the resistant power of African-American masking. I would argue further, however, that the unconscious celebration of black art inscribed in minstrelsy's conscious debasement of black culture seems here a metaphysical joke played upon white American culture as a result of the African penchant for satirical social critique. Minstrelsy, in this case, would occur as the white subject's imitation of the objectified black who has already established himself as subject in his parody of the white as object. Whites in effect were through the minstrel mask ultimately imitating their own objectification, a point that many black minstrels might have intuited considering their capable attempts to out-minstrel white minstrels.

Layering of meaning in black dramatic literary form is directly connected to minstrel masking. In terms of the artist, Du Bois saw the veil as producing conditions for performative flexibility since

the would-be black savant was confronted by the paradox that the knowledge his people needed was a twice-told tale to his white neighbors, while the knowledge which would teach the white world was Greek to his own flesh and blood. The innate love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his people a-

dancing and a-singing raised but confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist; for the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of the race which his larger audience despised, and he could not articulate the message of another people.<sup>127</sup>

Here Du Bois implies that refusal and revision are for the artist a necessary part of negotiating from within the veil.

The down side of creating such protective inaccessibility is that one must remain concealed behind the very devices one implements as strategies toward a relative safety zone. The veil, as conceived by Du Bois, did little to change outside circumstances, although his recognition of it was a powerful step toward black self-acknowledgment and understanding. Operating primarily as a barrier from risky recognition, the veil could not erase and replace others' perceptions of those veiled. As Michael G. Cooke argues in "Building on 'Signifying' and the Blues," signifying and its effective duplicity can ward off appropriation but, at the same time, may ensnare the user. This is "the peril of the veil;...the pose turned into the personality, the exploiter of a role into its helpless incarnation."<sup>128</sup> In other words, the stereotype remains unchallenged; the object of the gaze affirms its own reception.

Contemporary playwrights Kennedy, Shange, and Parks attempt to address this "peril of the veil" as it applies to examining African-American identity through literary device. They create masked texts that deploy the mask not only as that which conceals but also as that which challenges, for example, reversing and revising the ideological challenges of minstrelsy to their own needs.

These playwrights employ dramatic textual strategies as patterns and tropes of resistance that create as well as perform

the moments of masking. They create unfamiliar textual irruptions of difference enhanced by stage performance which can render the reader/spectator distant. Drama that cultivates unknowability through ultimately recognizable, yet unavoidable textual challenges can purposefully engage the reader in patterns of refusal, distance, or tension, and can establish a culturally defiant terrain of resistance, acting out that which it purposes to convey. Readers/spectators often compensate for the inaccessibilities of such texts by rationalizing, ignoring or simply not recognizing their difficulties.<sup>129</sup> Resistant texts thus relegate the reader, through these rhetorical strategies and in various degrees, to an outsider's position, purposefully rehearsing cultural exclusion or, at the very least, cultural disclosure. Whether from an outsider's or a mere observer's distance to an insider's recognition, these texts culminate for the reader/spectator in a performative rendition of the experience of otherness, partial belonging, or oneness, creating new occasion for communal mapping. These three playwrights ultimately challenge stereotypes inherent in broad narratives of culture and arrogant reader/spectator appropriations of such stereotypes through their textually disruptive renditions of the convolutions of minstrelsy and masking. Through these strategies, Kennedy, Shange, and Parks complicate consumable assumptions about race, gender, and identity,

# Notes

<sup>1</sup> Several sources contest Mr. Brown's first name. It has been suggested in certain documentation of the period that he might also have been known as James or Henry. I have taken what seems to me the most believable of these discovered by Jonathan Dewberry in the 1823 Record of Assessments for New York City's 8th Ward which Dewberry cites in his article "The African Grove Theatre and Company," *Black American Forum* 16 (Winter 1982):129. For further reading consult James V. Hatch's *Black Playwrights, 1823-1977, Annotated Bibliography of Plays* eds. James V. Hatch and Omani Abdullah (New York: Bowker, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> There are a number of historical accounts of the African Grove theatre. This discussion is based primarily upon the very detailed account of Mr. Brown's work in Samuel A. Hay's *African American Theatre: A Historical and Critical Analysis*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel A. Hay, *African American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994) 6.

<sup>4</sup> Hay, 10.

<sup>5</sup> This description of the Brown's efforts is suggested by Samuel Hay. He emphasizes the importance of this guerilla theatre to black dramatic history, arguing that "Brown used theatre, as Du Bois would later advocate it to be used, to protest racism" (*African American Theatre* 10).

<sup>6</sup> Hay, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Hay, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Hay, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Hay, 239.

<sup>10</sup> My use of this term in this context is informed by Henry Louis Gates' discussion of signifyin(g) texts, describing a type of "motivated signifyin(g)" where one text "Signifies upon other black texts, in the manner of the vernacular ritual of 'close reading'" (xxvi). In the case of Brown the revolt of the black Caribs is a cultural text or model for the development of his rebellious drama. For further discussion on signifyin(g) see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> Alain Locke, "The New Negro," *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925) 9. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>12</sup> Locke, "New Negro," 11.

<sup>13</sup> Locke, "New Negro," 15.



<sup>14</sup> Locke, "The Negro Youth Speaks," *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925) 47. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>15</sup> Locke, "Negro Youth," 47.

<sup>16</sup> Locke, "Negro Youth," 48-51.

<sup>17</sup> Locke, "Negro Youth," 50.

<sup>18</sup> This acceptance of Negro literature and art as somehow separate from American literature and art seems problematic even in these early years of developing black art aesthetics. Yet this division remains an effective means of marginalizing blackness and the literature that interrogates it. According to Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*, the separateness of the black presence in American literature and culture provides for whites "the means of thinking about body, mind, chaos, kindness and love;...[the means of] contemplation of freedom and aggression...and the following out of the ramifications of power," Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992. 48-49. The continued insistence on African-American literature as outside of mainstream American literature, for example, rather than as an integral part of the development of American literature creates a dilemma for African-Americanist scholars who might appropriately wish to represent themselves as Americanists. For the purposes of convenience, reference to African-American art and literature as its own entity is necessary, but not without an emphasis on the "American" qualifier in its hyphenated location.

<sup>19</sup> Locke, "Negro Youth," 53.

<sup>20</sup> Alain Locke, "The Negro and the American Stage," *Theatre Arts Monthly* 10 (1926): 116. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>21</sup> Alain Locke, "The Drama of Negro Life," *Theatre Arts Monthly* 10 (1926): 701-702. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>22</sup> Locke, "The Drama," 702.

<sup>23</sup> Locke, "The Drama," 703.

<sup>24</sup> Hay, 15.

<sup>25</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Drama Among Black Folk," *The Crisis* 12 (1916): 169. All further citation refer to this text.

<sup>26</sup> Du Bois, "The Drama Among," 170.

<sup>27</sup> Du Bois, "The Drama Among," 170.

<sup>28</sup> Du Bois, "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre: The Story of a Little Theatre Movement," *The Crisis* 32 (July 1926) 134. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>29</sup> Du Bois, "Krigwa Players," 134.

<sup>30</sup> Du Bois, "The Drama Among," 169.

<sup>31</sup> Du Bois, "Negro Art," *The Crisis* 22 (June 1921): 55-56. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>32</sup> Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis* 32 (October 1926): 290-291. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>33</sup> Du Bois, "Criteria," 292.

<sup>34</sup> Du Bois, "Criteria," 294.

<sup>35</sup> Du Bois, "Criteria," 294.

<sup>36</sup> Du Bois, "Criteria," 294.

<sup>37</sup> Du Bois, "The Drama," 169.

<sup>38</sup> Locke, "The Negro and the American Stage," 112.

<sup>39</sup> Du Bois, "The Negro and the American Stage," *The Crisis* 28 (June 1924): 56. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>40</sup> Locke, "The Negro and the American Stage," 113.

<sup>41</sup> Hay, 21.

<sup>42</sup> The fact that both men used the same title for their articles as footnotes 45 and 46 indicate, seems to me a direct substantiation of the dialogic nature of their aesthetic writings on drama. Du Bois's article "The Negro and the American Stage" was published in the 1924 issue of *The Crisis*. Locke clearly attempts an answer in his article of the same title published in a 1926 *Theatre Arts Monthly* issue, 10 (1926) 701-709.

<sup>43</sup> David Levering Lewis, ed. *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995) 289.

<sup>44</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "Woman Suffrage," *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995) 298.

<sup>45</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Damnation of Women," *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader* ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995) 300. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>46</sup> Du Bois, "Damnation," 309.

<sup>47</sup> Du Bois, "Damnation," 304.

<sup>48</sup> Nellie McKay, "Black Theater and Drama in the 1920s: Years of Growing Pains," *The Massachusetts Review* 24 (1987): 625.

<sup>49</sup> Nellie McKay, "'What Were They Saying?': Black Women Playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance," *Harlem Renaissance Re-examined* (New York: AMS Press, 1987) 206.

<sup>50</sup> Angelina Weld Grimké, Rachel, *The Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké* ed. Carolivia Herron (New York: Oxford UP, 1991) 134. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>51</sup> Grimké, Rachel, 170.

<sup>52</sup> Grimké, Rachel, 209.

<sup>53</sup> Angelina Weld Grimké, "'Rachel,' The Play of the Month: The Reason and Synopsis by the Author," *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, ed. Carolivia Herron (New York: Oxford UP, 1991) 414. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>54</sup> Grimké, "'Rachel,' The Play of the Month," 414.

<sup>55</sup> Grimké, "'Rachel,' The Play of the Month," 413.

<sup>56</sup> Nellie McKay, "'What Were They Saying?'" 147.

<sup>57</sup> Mary Burrill, "They That Sit in Darkness Black Theatre U.S.A.: Forty Five Plays by Black Americans," eds. James V. Hatch and Ted Shine (New York: The Free Press, 1974) 179.

<sup>58</sup> Burrill, "They That Sit," 182.

<sup>59</sup> McKay, "What Were They Saying?" 138-139.

<sup>60</sup> There was such difficulty, for example, in attaining published copies of the critical pieces that these women dramatists actually published that in some cases the interlibrary loan department "exhausted all possible sources" and terminated its searches. In the cases of Shirley Graham, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Marita Bonner and Eulalie Spence, much unpublished expository writing, critical essays and correspondence remain in collections in libraries in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and other archives, unpublished and unexamined critically.

<sup>61</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre," *The Crisis* 32 (1926): 134. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>62</sup> James V. Hatch and Ted Shine, eds., *Black Theatre U.S.A.: Forty Five Plays by Black Americans* (New York: The Free Press, 1974) 790.

<sup>63</sup> Langston Hughes, "The Need for an Afro-American Theatre," *Anthology of the American Negro in the Theatre: a Critical Approach*, ed. Lindsay Patterson (New York: Publishers Company, Inc., 1969) 163-164.

<sup>64</sup> Ed Bullins, "Theatre of Reality," *Negro Digest* April (1966): 61. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>65</sup> Clayton Riley, "On Black Theatre," *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle (New York: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1971) 327.

<sup>66</sup> Ron Milner, "Black Theatre-Go Home!" *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle (New York: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1971) 310. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>67</sup> Samuel A. Hay, *African American Theatre: An Historic and Critical Analysis* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994) 96.

<sup>68</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Dutchman and The Slave* (New York: Marrow Quill, 1964) 71-72. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>69</sup> Jones, *Dutchman and The Slave*, 66-68.

<sup>70</sup> Again, like Baraka, several other black dramatists called for an activism in Black Revolutionary drama. In his "Theater of Reality," Ed Bullins described a black theater that is:

revolutionary...[in] theme and character.... It is the exposure of illusion through exploding myths and lies that are disguised as reality and truths.... Its trend should only go counter to that force in Western society which dehumanizes, enslaves, and defeats man at his best.... This theater...must be viewed as against society, the American society in particular," *Negro Digest* April (1966): 65.

James Baldwin argues in "Theatre: The Negro In and Out" that for Negroes and Negro characters:

there is always a murderous rage, or a murderous fear, or both, not quite sleeping at the bottom of their hearts and minds. The truth is that they do not have any real respect for white people: they despise them and they fear them.... If the playwright does not know this,...he cannot draw the character truthfully.... In discussing the theatre..., the time has come to begin a bloodless revolution" *Negro Digest* April (1966): 39-41.

<sup>71</sup> LeRoi Jones, "The Revolutionary Theatre," *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966) 210-215. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>72</sup> Ron Karenga, "Black Art: Mute Matter Given Form and Function," *New Black Voices: An Anthology of Contemporary Afro-American Literature*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: Penguin Books, 1972) 478-479.

<sup>73</sup> Milner, "Black Theatre-Go Home!" 293.

<sup>74</sup> LeRoi Jones, "State/meant," *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966) 251. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>75</sup> Jones, "The Revolutionary Theatre," 215.

<sup>76</sup> Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle (New York: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1971) 269. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>77</sup> Jones, "The Revolutionary Theatre," 213.

<sup>78</sup> Kimberly Benston, "Cities in Bezique: Adrienne Kennedy's Expressionistic Vision," *CLA Journal* 20 (1976): 235.

<sup>79</sup> Clive Barnes, "Theatre Reviews," *New York Times* 1 Nov. (1969): 39:1.

<sup>80</sup> Shelby Steele, "Notes on Ritual in the New Black Theater," *The Theatre of Black Americans: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Errol Hill (New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1990) 30.

<sup>81</sup> Steele, "Notes on Ritual," 30.

<sup>82</sup> Steele, "Notes on Ritual," 31-32.

<sup>83</sup> Joseph Papp, "The Off Off Broadway Alternative," *New York's Other Theatre: A Guide to Off Off Broadway*, ed. Mindy N. Levine (New York: Avon Books, 1981) xi.

<sup>84</sup> Papp, xi-xvii.

<sup>85</sup> Papp, xi-xvii.

<sup>86</sup> Edward Albee, "Preface," *Two Plays By Edward Albee: The American Dream and Zoo Story* (New York: Putnam Publishing Group, 1961) 55.

<sup>87</sup> Milner, "Black Theatre-Go Home!" 288.

<sup>88</sup> LeRoi Jones, "The Myth of 'Negro Literature,'" *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966) 111.

<sup>89</sup> Jones, "The Revolutionary Theatre," 213.

<sup>90</sup> Grimké, "'Rachel,' The Play of the Month," 415.

<sup>91</sup> Grimké, "'Rachel,' The Play of the Month," 414-415.

<sup>92</sup> It is important to acknowledge that some African-American scholars dispute analysis of African-American literature which is informed by European critical theory. Barbara Christian argues, for example, that in reference to African-American literary criticism, high theory is "so privileged and has diverted so many of us from doing the first readings of the literature being written today as well as of past works about which nothing has been written." Christian notes that much of postmodern discourse, in its "movement to exalt theory," has succumbed to the very systemic demands it ostensibly intends to undermine. Because contemporary Western theorists "sought to 'deconstruct' the tradition to which they belonged even as they used the same forms, style, language of that tradition, forms which necessarily embody its values," such theory has developed its own "tendency towards the monolithic" (44-45). She suggests that "theory has become a commodity which helps determine whether we are hired or promoted in academic institutions—worse whether we are heard at all.... The critic yearning for attention has displaced the writer and has conceived of himself as the center" (37-38). Such shifts in emphasis, Christian finds, is particularly devastating for African-American literary criticism since "many of us have become obsessed with the nature of reading itself to the extent that we have stopped writing about literature being written today" (43). The Race for Theory," *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, eds. Abdul R. JanMohammed and David Lloyd (New York: Oxford UP, 1990) 43-45. "Christian's points in some ways accuse Western theorists of reifying new metanarratives of deconstruction, contrary to the very notions of Lyotard. I would argue that many of her concerns have validity, yet to ignore Western contributions to the examinations of ways of knowing and the impact of language would be to place African-American criticism

outside of certain political and social deliberations that immediately impact upon literary discourse itself. I would agree with Henry Louis Gates in his observation that in relation to other western theories the following is "the proper work of black criticism: to define itself with- and against-other theoretical activities." *The Signifying Monkey*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) xxiv.

<sup>93</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979) 82.

<sup>94</sup> Lyotard, 82.

<sup>95</sup> Lyotard, 82.

<sup>96</sup> Lyotard, 16-17.

<sup>97</sup> Lyotard, xxiv.

<sup>98</sup> Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 6-7.

<sup>99</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, & Class* (New York: Random House, 1981) 4.

<sup>100</sup> Davis, 5.

<sup>101</sup> Toni Cade (Bambara), "Preface," *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: New American Library, Inc., 1970) 8.

<sup>102</sup> Cade, 8.

<sup>103</sup> Cade, 8.

<sup>104</sup> Cade, 9.

<sup>105</sup> Toni Cade (Bambara), "On the Issues of Roles," *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade (New York: New American Library, Inc., 1970) 103.

<sup>106</sup> Cade, 103.

<sup>107</sup> Mary Helen Washington, *Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds* (New York: Doubleday, 1990) 6.

<sup>108</sup> Washington, 6.

<sup>109</sup> Washington, 14.

<sup>110</sup> Washington, 14-15.

<sup>111</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) xi-xii.

- <sup>112</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk, Three Negro Classics*, ed. John Hope Franklin (1903; New York: Avon Books, 1965) 216. All further citations refer to this text.
- <sup>113</sup> Gates, 49.
- <sup>114</sup> Gates, 53.
- <sup>115</sup> John Blassingame, *The Slave Community* (New York: Oxford UP, 1971) 121.
- <sup>116</sup> William Piersen, *Black Legacy: America's Hidden Heritage* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993) 73.
- <sup>117</sup> Piersen, xii.
- <sup>118</sup> Piersen, 54.
- <sup>119</sup> The cakewalk is clearly an example of African-American humor and satire as it parodies white formal dances such as the minuet. The African-American's supposedly "awkward" mimicry of white dance was in fact an exaggerated form of parody, kicking high and prancing in hand-me-down finery to create an ironic rendition of white "high manners" while remaining in the relatively safe and effective realm of "foolish" satire, most often unrecognized as such due to the superior obtuseness of the targets of their humor (Piersen 64-65).
- <sup>120</sup> Examples of "Daddy Mention" tales can be found in Hurston's *The Sanctified Church*.
- <sup>121</sup> Hurston, "Characteristics," 58.
- <sup>122</sup> Gates, xxiv.
- <sup>123</sup> Cooke, 35.
- <sup>124</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) 17.
- <sup>125</sup> Lott, 17.
- <sup>126</sup> Piersen, 181, 183.
- <sup>127</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 216.
- <sup>128</sup> Michael G. Cooke, *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Achievement of Intimacy* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984) 16.
- <sup>129</sup> Doris Sommers, "Resisting the Heat," *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, eds. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke UP, 1993) 408.

CHAPTER 2  
(RE)NEGOTIATING RACISM: RESISTANCE AND PERFORMANCE STRATEGIES IN  
ADRIENNE KENNEDY'S EARLY DRAMA

Analysis of the specific attributes of Adrienne Kennedy's works is buttressed in this chapter by a theoretical framing informed by, among others, Michel Foucault, Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler. Working with questions of relations of power in terms of racism and performative<sup>1</sup> constructions of gender, Kennedy questions rigid ideas of black identity and community in her drama. Her work is unique in its contribution to the postmodern vision of contemporary black drama because it interrogates issues of black identity through analysis of the interstitial positioning of her characters, who are consistently biracial. She also refutes the notion of black community as monolithic, insisting on plumbing the personal perceptions and experiences of character within community and revising the ideological implications of black face minstrelsy as a way into questioning ideologically oppressive binaries, such as white/black, male/female, colonizer/colonized.

Kennedy wrote her early works as a contemporary of such well-known black revolutionary dramatists as Imamu Amiri Baraka, Ron Milner, and Larry Neal. Unlike the plays of these celebrated artists, however, Kennedy's works was not embraced by her contemporaries as relevant black drama; perhaps mostly because of



their inscrutable nature, her plays received no attention within the framework of black revolutionary, political literature. Yet because Kennedy's work explored experimental form and content as they might be applied to African-American protest of racist oppression, her drama deserved notice as a particular kind of black revolutionary or resistance theater. More often, though, her plays have been linked to or labeled as avant-garde because of her use of radical form: nonlinear, illogical plots; emphasis on symbol; and often unsettling manipulation of characters, props and setting.

Much like the symbolist emphasis on satiric irrationalities, Kennedy develops characters who display hallucinatory perceptions and incongruous actions. These figures are for Kennedy commentaries upon racist American ontologies. In her first play, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (written in 1962, produced in 1964), the character Sarah is fragmented into four selves. These selves attempt to address the impossible reality of biracial contradictions inextricably interwoven in their complexities and thus operating within the contexts of technologies of racism, which can be defined as a complex web of interrelated factors of power that reproduce racially oppressive ideologies of the dominant social order.

One telling similarity in the perceptions of Sarah's selves is that they all share in a horrifying, massive loss of hair. In this play, baldness is a signification of complete loss of self and results from the necessity of engaging in destructive

economies of racism that deploy ideologies of racism. As Sarah's Man self explains,

it begins with disaster of my hair. I awaken. My hair has fallen out, not all of it, but a mass from the crown of my head that lies on the center of my white pillow. I arise and in the greyish winter morning light of my room I stand staring at my hair, dazed by sleeplessness, still shaken by nightmares of my mother. Is it true? Yes. It is my hair. . . . And in my sleep I had been visited by my bald crazy mother who comes to me crying, calling me to her bedside. . . . Black man, black man, my mother says, I never should have let a black man put his hands on me. She comes to me her bald skull shining. Black diseases, Sarah, she says. Black diseases. I run. She follows me, her bald skull shining. That is the beginning.<sup>2</sup>

Loss of hair is a central trope of the play that also reiterates losses and inaccessibilities fostered by the radical difficulties of Kennedy's text. Density of ritual language and abruptness of a-linear structure produce for readers/spectators a loss of familiarity as they work their way through the play, fostering in them an experience as Other; the reader is constructed outside of meaning. Consequently, this experience allows readers/spectators to perhaps engage themselves in the more specific workings of the trope.

Loss of hair more directly works toward a representation of the anguish of racially defined bodies, of a self-objectification inscribed in the self-hatred that Sarah's selves feel. Convinced that the white world is a place of aspiration, of confirmation for those who would be, if not white, whitelike, Sarah cannot abide her own blackness. She attempts to rid herself of this blackness by becoming Queen Victoria, or the Duchess of Hapsburg, or Jesus, each a figure of power in Western culture. But her

other black selves, the Man and Patrice Lumumba, become increasingly provocative, proscribing Sarah's continued attempts to escape the reality of her biracial body. A physical manifestation of her inability to integrate her racialized self-contradictions emerges as piece by piece her hair falls away, foreshadowing her ultimate loss of self through suicide. And such an emphasis on the subconscious dimensions of racial pain, strikingly exposed through dramatic symbol, does align Kennedy unquestionably with European avant-garde aesthetics and with concurrent audience response to those aesthetics.

From the early twentieth century, European avant-garde theater attempts a studied formlessness in its insistence on dream play structures and symbols, its abstract characterizations, and its discontinuity of scenes. This radicality of form is to express a protest which is ostensibly a revolt against predictable forms of traditional contemporary theater, but which is more profoundly implicated in its protest against traditional bourgeois visions of classic philosophy, of contemporary civilization, or a rational reality as model for Western modern human experience.<sup>3</sup> For avant-gardists there is an unknowable malignant cosmic force that oppresses human beings and creates their "helplessness in the universe," a universe which is "implacably hostile;" thus avant-garde dramatists attempt a "scream of protest" and a "total rejection of the world and cosmos."<sup>4</sup>

Alfred Jarry, considered a founder of avant-garde theater, created, for example, an alternative order, Pataphysics, as an

answer to the quiet desperation of human existence. Pataphysics forcefully, yet without hope of vindication, professed a nihilistic defiance, a "calculated insanity,"<sup>5</sup> a rebellion that Jarry attempted to create with his "Ubu" plays and their paradoxical and illogical dramatic form and content. Plot, as an example, is rarely predictable in Jarry's works and takes on a humorous cynicism that continuously stuns the audience. In the case of Jarry's first play, *Ubu Roi*, which opened on December 10, 1896, his irredeemably evil character Ubu began the play with one French expletive emphatically spoken and irrevocably altered (from *merde* to *merdre*) and caused a full-fledged riot of protesting patrons in the theater house.<sup>6</sup> Another avant garde playwright, Antonin Artaud, stepped further into the realm of madness with his works, emphasizing the grotesque and inverting moral categories.<sup>7</sup> Also, August Strindberg developed his concept of the "dream play," insisting that although dreams are false, the dream state is in itself true.<sup>8</sup>

In a similar way, Kennedy's emphasis on dream symbolism, shock techniques, subconscious human behaviors, and rebellious characters responding to the malignant forces of social oppression plumbs the possibilities of the avant-garde. Images of bloody, balding heads; ghostly masked faces; constantly shifting sets, and the seemingly inexplicable presence of animal figures in her plays are just a few examples of Kennedy's use of the impact of shock as protest in a manner related to avant-garde.

Yet for avant-garde playwrights drama renders to its audience an agenda of artistic/cultural protest and a

generalized, nihilist vision of human experience. Kennedy's issues of protest are far more focused; she concentrates on the conditions of a particular set of humans who suffer from the implacable hostility of racial/sexual oppressors, thus demystifying avant-garde attacks on bourgeois sensibilities by locating the forces of human oppression socially rather than cosmically. As it directly confronts issues of American racism and sexism, Kennedy's drama offers varied possibilities of performance and textual refusal in a manner of and beyond the precepts of Euro-American avant-garde theater. Unlike avant-garde playwrights such as Jean Genet—who uses the absurdity of black/white racism in *The Blacks*, for example, as only one theme of many in his protest works against a generalized negative human condition—Kennedy makes conflict between black/white races the center of her works.

Kennedy, like many avant-gardists, is often perceived as a nihilist but should instead be seen as offering through the pain and anger of her ritualistic drama what might be viewed as a kind of cathartic vindication for black audiences. This possibility is explored by John Scott who argues, "critics must acknowledge that the motivation to rage in many Black dramatic characters is ever present and requires, particularly for the Black spectator, little or no dramatic preparation...." However, rather than perceiving such characters as full of despair, "Black spectators...are likely to regard these unbending acts and the resulting deaths--whenever they come--as apotheoses of dignity, not acts of nihilism."<sup>9</sup>

An example of such audience evocation might be found in Kennedy's drama *A Rat's Mass* (1966). As the two protagonists, Brother and Sister Rat, face inevitable death at the hands of a Nazi firing squad somehow comprised of Jesus, Joseph, Mary, and two Wise Men, the entirety of the play suggests a sacrificial ritual that will bring an end to racial suffering. The Rats confirm this in their last words:

every time we go out red blood runners will be on the street.... At least soon we will get rid of our rat heads and rat voices in beams will say no more we are your lost Caesars.... We will become headless and all will cease the dark sun will be bright no more and no more sounds of shooting in the distance. It will be the end.<sup>10</sup>

In their sacrifice, as is mythically represented in much of African-American literature, the Rats pay the price for those that will follow them, attempting to exorcise for good the ratness that torments them and choosing death rather than a life of oppression and guilt.

Kennedy, if she moves away from nihilism, then, is more than the sum of avant-garde while at the same time testing the limits of American drama. Her plays challenge Euro-American ideologies of oppression while adapting Euro-American experimental theater. Their experimentation pushes beyond a black revolutionary theater grounded in American realism and naturalism. Ironically, Kennedy's fragmented characterizations, disruption of unities, surrealist dramatic landscapes, and ritualistic form left a number of her contemporary critics uncertain of her effect as they attempted to evaluate her work in terms of "conventional theatrical tenets."<sup>11</sup> Her early works were often described as

obscure, dreary, too personal and were dismissed as disappointing and derivative of known avant-garde playwrights such as Jean Genet.<sup>12</sup> Thus, some critics seemed to lack the imagination and foresight to recognize in her work a theory of performance which disrupts pre-existing notions of African-American political engagement.

Kennedy's search for voice is decidedly disturbing. In her plays disruption of pre-existing notions of African-American self image and communal engagement occurs through a 1)re-examination of the complexities of racial identities through an, at times contradictory, privileging of interstitial spaces, such as bi-racialism, bi-culturalism, and blurred gender. This re-examination is effected via 2) ritualistic language and action adapted toward renditions of black women's experiences and via 3)interruptions in traditional dramatic form. Such performance strategies allow Kennedy to work within and against African-American identities traditionally grounded in the dialectics of patriarchy and racism.

#### Resisting Technologies of Racism

Transgression in Kennedy's works might best be described as deployment of performance strategies, such as ritual language and formal repetition and revision, in an attempt to expose multiplicities of oppression. Her plays force a recognition of mutually perpetuating relations of power that sustain the workings of racism. Such relations of power include, but are not limited to, gender, history, patriarchy, miscegenation, capitalism, religion, sexuality, language, race constructs.

Michel Foucault in his analysis of sexual economies describes relations of power as "the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations by a certain deployment deriving from complex political technology."<sup>13</sup> This Foucauldian concept of relations of power can be and has been applied to other social constructions. For example, Teresa de Lauretis reconstructs Foucault's "technologies of sex"<sup>14</sup> within the framework of gender theory. Her *Technologies of Gender* applies the theory of relations of power toward a consideration of "gender as the product and the process of a number of social technologies, of techno-social or bio-medical apparatus."<sup>15</sup> I would argue that race and/or racism as a construct also can be seen as the product of various social technologies, including gender. Bodies preemptively ordered and marked by color as well as gender eventuate as over-determined products of bio-political technologies.

Both de Lauretis and Foucault mention the instance of race perfunctorily in the development of their tenets, acknowledging its possibility in the application of power relations theory. I suggest more directly that race/racism operates inextricably within relations of power, producing out of a socio-biologically driven matrix a racially determined "object." Judith Butler describes in *Bodies That Matter* the operation of an exclusionary matrix which forms gender-determined subjects through

the simultaneous production of a domain of object beings, those who are not yet 'subjects,' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The object designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are



nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject.... In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation.<sup>16</sup>

Although proffered within the frame of the gendered materiality of female bodies, Butler's theory of the abject is clearly applicable to the racial materiality of black bodies, more particularly the doubly repudiated matter of female, black bodies. And I would argue that Kennedy's extreme depictions of black female characters in plays of the 1960's and 1970's recognize and articulate social intricacies of power in a way unprecedented for black American dramatists of her time, apprehending and engaging these relations of power as they operate within and as, if one might again appropriate Foucault's vocabulary, complex technologies of racism. Kennedy's plays first and foremost confront and deconstruct dominant relations of power as they are underwritten by such binaries as the subject/abject: white/black, male/female. In this, she differs radically from other black revolutionary playwrights of her time as they emphasized rather than interrogated the above binaries as representative of American racial and sexual polarization.

Kennedy's early plays interrogate technologies of racism in an intensely personal manner by incorporating a notion of performance which, rather than invoking a generic, almost monolithic, collective black experience as more recognized black revolutionary drama is wont to do, acts out a subconscious,

primitive vision of the racialized self.<sup>17</sup> This vision privileges individual black experience, even autobiographical experience, a radical writing of oneself into existence, as a necessary part of Kennedy's ritualistic rendition of African-American protest. Although a primitive vision of self is reminiscent of, but not limited to, dichotomized notions of blackness as primitive/emotional and whiteness as advanced/rational, Kennedy undermines this duality by offering a third space reflective of anguish and protest which insists on the permeability of the binary. This transgressive third space becomes a terrain for working out, through the specific experiences of African-American women, defining marks of color and sex where they operate as technologies of racism in American society.

In one of her most powerful symbolisms, boldly present in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Kennedy locates the third space through re-inventions of traditional American blackface minstrelsy. This tradition, as Eric Lott and Robert Toll have convincingly shown, defines whiteness by constructing opposing images of black physicality and culture.<sup>18</sup> An active force in the success of blackface minstrelsy was precisely its revaluation of a white sense of decorum and acceptability through the open ridicule of "darky" ignorance, vulgarity and physical excess. Eric Lott focuses on this construction, examining "the role of blackface in what one might call, after Gramsci, the production of racist consent" and argues that "minstrelsy's contradictory appeal" was an "attempt to shore up 'white' class identities by targeting new enemies such as immigrants, blacks, and tipplers." Thus early

minstrelsy's "plots and types already hinted at the uses of minstrel acts for whites insecure about their whiteness."<sup>19</sup> Yet as Lott's title *Love and Theft* suggests, a fascination, if not envy, for the very aspects of stereotyped black life that white blackface minstrels ridiculed in their acts raises considerable questions as to the influence of black life and culture on white Americans of the period.

In addition, in the latter half the 1800's a number of African-American blackface minstrels and eventually African-American minstrel troupes, forced by a limited theatrical market, donned black cork on their own black faces as a way to improve the possibilities of their own financial success as actors. The incidence of blacks in blackface suggests irrepressible mirroring effects as African-American performers in some ways derided whites by perfecting their own art of imitating whites who were imitating and deriding, through stereotypical blackface positionings, the antics of blacks who were in effect often imitating and parodying in their antics the behaviors of whites. Yet, inevitably, at the same time, blacks in blackface could not escape the perpetuation of the stereotypes they might, or might not, have wished to subvert through their performances.

As Barbara Babcock-Abrahams suggests, "[a]ny form of symbolic inversion has an implicitly radical dimension."<sup>20</sup> Kennedy's use of "whiteface," an inversion of blacks in blackface by producing blacks in whiteface, reiterates the possibilities of radicality so evident in African-American minstrel troupe performances. The theatrical acts of blacks in blackface could be

seen as early transgressive performances that eventuated into a black pastiche of white ridicule of black Americans.

For example, consider the case of William Henry Lane (more well-known as Master Juba), an African-American who corks up in 1841 to earn a living in the P.T. Barnum circus. This black man in blackface eventually becomes so effective at imitating whites imitating blacks that in 1844-45 he engages in a number of a dancing duels with the self-proclaimed and publicly acknowledged best white blackface minstrel dancer living, John Diamond. Lane's dances are consistently declared as better at imitating Diamond imitating black dance than any dance imitation that Diamond could muster up.<sup>21</sup>

The significance of Lane's capacity to outdo the doers ultimately suggests an unavoidable realization of black performativity, self-representation through a complexity of subversions. Despite the obvious difficulties and implications of blacks performing in blackface and thus in some ways affirming and perpetuating negative stereotypes, what must be acknowledged is that while on the white stage, through a subversive reversal, Lane produces some identifiable form of self-representation. In fact, Lane eventually becomes the one black dancer accepted and known as black on the white stage in the 1840s.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, self-affirming acts of whites who perform in blackface and the complexities of blacks who perform in blackface both provide early models for Kennedy's inversions of blackface written over a hundred years later.

Reversal of blackface in the play *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, for example, subverts a constraining performativity of African-American racial inferiority by forcing the staging of whiteness. Thus the impact of American blackface in terms of performing racial contradictions is revised. Kennedy takes blackface and redefines it by creating black characters in whiteface, reversing the obvious comfort zone of American white minstrelsy where blackness can be quickly and easily wiped away to reveal a consoling and reaffirming whiteness. She, rather, underpins whiteness with a hidden incomprehensible darkness, a constructed darkness incomprehensible to whites and unfathomable and inescapable for blacks, which although it in itself perpetuates mythical stereotypes of blackness, is a representation suited to the complexities of the dilemma of her whitefaced characters.

These characters have lost a sense of social definition because Kennedy in this first play exposes the materiality of whiteness, as well as blackness, in white America. If in America individuals are defined by the color of their bodies and materiality of black existence is visible while, as Richard Dyer observes, whiteness is invisible, then Kennedy's characters in whiteface confound the invisibility of whiteness by making it emphatically visible while at the same time making blackness unavoidably present.<sup>23</sup> Whiteness here is then interrogated, but for her characters whiteness is also an object of desire; therefore, these characters cannot escape the irony of the binary, subverting and privileging the object of scrutiny, and further complicating the characters' own interstitial locations.

Thus the predominant image of whiteness in *Funnyhouse* exists as an unavoidable, overdetermined presence in Sarah's life, and characters in whiteface in this play are perhaps the most dynamic and striking demonstration of Kennedy's view of the materiality of whiteness. Marked by their outer color, two of Sarah's selves, Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg, are described in stage directions as following:

their faces look exactly alike and will wear masks or be made up to be whitish yellow. It is an alabaster face, the skin drawn tightly over the high cheekbones, great dark eyes that seem gouged out of the head, a high forehead, a full red mouth and a head of frizzy hair. If the characters do not wear a mask then the face must be highly powdered and possess a hard expressionless quality and a stillness as in the face of death.<sup>24</sup>

Emphasis here on bold facial features reiterates similar exaggerations of blackface minstrels. White blackface minstrels have been consistently described as "always...distinguished by an unusually large mouth and a peculiar kind of broad grin."<sup>25</sup> These performers had their faces "'made up' with big lips ..., [and] exercised great care in fixing their mouths.... These big lips and the distended mouth helped accentuate their shining white teeth."<sup>26</sup> The deep black cork of blackface makeup also accentuated the whites of the eyes, and the performers distinguished themselves by "grimacing...to the accompaniment of various clever or grotesque steps...which sometimes became indescribably eccentric gyrations."<sup>27</sup> Performers also availed themselves of a number of accessories, using boxes of "burnt cork..., and special 'scare' or 'fright' wigs to make the hair stand on end at will."<sup>28</sup>

Clearly Kennedy is interested in the obvious similarities that masking in both of these cases accomplishes. Yet, in the instance of minstrelsy the exaggeration of black cork, huge lips and kinky hair evokes a fascinating, yet unacceptable, black physicality; color and features are here marks of commodification, production of blackness for the consumption, control, and cultural assent of white audiences. On the other hand, for Kennedy the blackness pouring through the "great dark eyes gouged out of the head" in the "highly powdered" white faces of Sarah's selves is primarily unmanageable, representative of what Lott calls the "unruly resonances of blackness and femaleness" in American experience.<sup>29</sup> This blackness is unruly first for the mixed character Sarah, who cannot manage the awareness of her black blood and who ultimately is consumed by her need to both confront and flee its existence. In her whiteness as well as blackness Sarah invokes Kennedy's view of the complexity of racialized bodies within a racist economy. Perhaps one of the most powerful justifications for the "hard expressionless quality and a stillness as in the face of death" that reside in the masked faces of Sarah's selves, blackness is a part of her mixed racial heritage and exists as an emblem of Sarah's torture, her inability to resolve personal, cultural, and racial conflicts that an overdetermined position as a mulatto in a racist society must demand of her:

when I am the Duchess of Hapsburg I sit opposite Victoria in my headpiece and we talk. The other time I wear the dress of a student, dark clothes and dark stockings. Victoria always wants me to tell her of whiteness. She wants me to tell her of a royal world

where everything and everyone is white and there are no unfortunate black ones. For as we of royal blood know, black is evil and has been from the beginning. Even before my mother's hair started to fall out. Before she was raped by a wild black beast. Black was evil.<sup>30</sup>

Self-hate is the result of Sarah's racialized understanding of her family experience. The play presents the character Sarah struggling, as the rest of her family has, against the disintegrating effects of inter/intra-racial bigotry. Her mother, a very light skinned, sexually frigid black woman, is institutionalized, driven insane from being raped by her sexually frustrated, extremely dark husband. The mother exclaims, "Black man, black man, I never should have let a black man put his hands on me. The wild black beast raped me and now my skull is shining."<sup>31</sup> Sarah's mother's frigidity and loss of hair is a direct result of her experience of alienation as an assimilated light-skinned African-American woman and her subsequent incapacity to accept the darkness of her husband.

Sarah too is characterized as recently noticing a frightening loss of her own hair, an indication of the difficulties she is encountering psychologically as a result of her own propensity to reject black skin and to glorify whiteness as a skin color, a culture, and a religion:

it is my dream to live in rooms of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano, oriental carpets and to eat my meals on a white glass table. I will visit my friends' apartments which will contain books, photographs of Roman ruins, pianos, and oriental carpets. My friends will be white.<sup>32</sup>

Sarah cherishes her glass table almost as a sacrificial altar with ceremonial meals offered up on its smooth, cold whiteness



and surrounded by the emblems of elite culture. Oriental carpets, a library of books, a piano may represent a bourgeois conception of the good life; the image of the rooms also smacks of an imperialism operating to procure such luxury. And her attempt at glorification of Western culture through the recognition of lifeless Roman ruins suggests the abortive nature of European influence in her experience. The things she wishes for and her insistence on white friends at the beginning of the play present her dilemma as a racially mixed, thoroughly assimilated Negro in a racist culture. Sarah says she needs white friends

as an embankment to keep me from reflecting too much upon the fact that I am a Negro. For, like all educated Negroes--out of life and death essential--I find it necessary to maintain a stark fortress against recognition of myself.<sup>33</sup>

But the necessity to run from the self makes a fragile consciousness even more so. This character's already fragmented personality progressively disintegrates in the play as she comes more and more to realize the significant power of blackness in her life. Her inability to accept this significance because of her racialized past sets up the implication that in denying blackness Sarah denies herself, her mother, and her father. The issue of her black identity and the place of her black family history in the larger scheme of her self-comprehension again is the emblem of her final torture; as the quote below illustrates, she wants to cease to exist:

as for myself I long to become even a more pallid Negro than I am now; pallid like Negroes on the covers of American Negro magazines; soulless, educated and irreligious. I want to possess no moral value, particularly as to my being. I want not to be.<sup>34</sup>

The violence of Sarah's desire to be pallid or not "be" emphasizes Kennedy's interest in the tensions of the interstitial position of the mixed race bodies, challenging simplistic notions of racial binaries. The inability to resolve such fluidity in terms of racial determination provides here the difficult terrain and possibly liberating capacities of interstitiality. Ultimately the "stillness as in the face of death" in the masks that Sarah's selves must wear predicts her inability to address effectively the multiple difficulties of her position and foreshadow her complete loss of self with suicide as her final release.

Masking also conjures up an additional space for black protest as Kennedy's characters "perform" their oppressions. *Funnyhouse of a Negro* further complicates the doubly determined nature of Kennedy's whiteface character Sarah and her other selves by underscoring the in-betweenness of their position as racially mixed characters wrestling with a continual quest to ascertain what they are and wish not to be (part black) and what they are not but wish to be (completely white). As Sarah is both black and white and yet pines to be only white, her whiteface and that of her selves makes visible a sought-after whiteness and produces a blackness that seems invisible but is also inescapable. Whiteface embodies here the further complicated, unavoidable material quality of mixed racial existence, underscoring the existence of interstitiality, not only as a privileged space for protest but also as an agonizing position of irreconcilable contradictions, privileging the interstitial moment as an effectively radical but disturbing place.

Rejecting the enhanced binary inscribed in the racially separatist agendas of black revolutionary theatre allows Kennedy to see an "in-between" space, a "beyond" that, as Homi Bhabha suggests, provides

the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation. It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.<sup>35</sup>

For Kennedy, in her drama as early as 1963, undefined boundaries of racial identity, and the loss of unified subjectivity offered new venues of protest and cultural engagement, but not without an anguish from within. This terrain of tensions rehearses performances of the racially mixed body and becomes a renascent, if still painful and possibly unmanageable, alternative in negotiations of race in America.

Kennedy's efforts in masking and the interstitial are again reminiscent of the effects of blackface minstrelsy. As Lott argues "the blackface phenomenon was virtually constituted by such slippages [in subject and object], positives turned to negatives, selves into others and back again."<sup>36</sup> Finally, the interstitial positioning of Kennedy's characters allows for new manners of play in terms of racial binaries, offering a certain flexibility for treating questions Kennedy asks as a black revolutionary dramatist concerned with the multiply determined performativity of the black body as a force in understanding the complexities of racism and sexism. Kennedy has Sarah herself

identify her inbetweenness as a place which both creates her dilemma and offers her new possibilities of negotiating that dilemma: "He is the darkest, my father is the darkest, my mother is the lightest. I am in between."<sup>37</sup>

In this same ironical vision, Kennedy's other early plays exhibit attempts at negotiating whiteness outside of or at least in contestation with the ideology of the white/black binary by emphasizing in a most negative manner the very qualities of restraint, silence, military power often celebrated as white strengths. These attempts figure white culture through flat, maniacal, restricted beings, often shocking despite their ostensibly human characterizations.

In *A Rat's Mass*, for example, where mulatto children are figured in their blackness as rat-like humans, whiteness shows itself in the cruel unflattering forms of Nazis, Germans, Caesar's army, a procession of Christian figures, and as Rosemary, a beautiful white child. The images of the Nazis and Caesar's army are descriptive only; Rosemary merely invokes their presence and predicts their ominous arrival. The Christian procession, however, has a strong presence in the play. Rather than comforting these children, who are in effect attempting to exorcise their guilt of incest through the celebration of a rat's mass, the procession haunts and taunts them with an eloquent silent presence, marching in and out of view. They speak only to say "Goodbye Kay and Blake. We are leaving you,"<sup>38</sup> even as the children beg them not leave. This procession of Christian figures (Jesus, Joseph, Mary, and two wise men) finally merges with Nazi

images when they march in with shotguns and execute the rat-children.

Such an implied collaboration between organized Christian religion and the genocidal Nazi faction is telling both in terms of Kennedy's global view of western oppression and, more specifically, in her perception of American Christian participation in a racist social structure, re-invoking western binaries of dominant/dominated, Christian/heathen, white/colored. Kennedy's writing about her travels in Europe implies a mixed sense of awe at and disenfranchisement from European artistic and Christian culture while her references to her residence in Africa describe an unavoidable interest in racio-political intrigue.<sup>39</sup> With even these autobiographical images of Europe/third world starkly juxtaposed, it is not surprising, then, that Kennedy's conflicting impressions of western imperialism and of Africa figure forcefully in this, as in her other early plays, and work as a correlative to her interrogation of American racism.

In *A Rat's Mass* images of the church, of God, of white culture conspire against the young mulatto rat-children. Perhaps the most striking of these is the characterization of the child Rosemary. A female representation of western culture, Rosemary carries implications of the complicity of white women in western oppressive dominance. Two young "pale Negro children" have been coerced by this older white Christian girl, who is perpetually dressed in white for her First Holy Communion, to commit incest seemingly for the satisfaction of her own voyeur fantasies. The children's innocent commission of the unfamiliar, unspeakable sin

at Rosemary's encouragement and the unhealthy love these children have for Rosemary become a devastating force within their family, causing Sister Rat to be institutionalized while she experiences a taboo pregnancy, and instilling unbearable guilt in the consciousness of Brother Rat. Their guilt-ridden fear compels them to celebrate a ritual mass which they hope will absolve them of their horrible sin. Yet the ceremony seems only to increase their anguish and unease.

Rosemary continues to taunt them, calling upon her ancestors Jesus, Joseph, Mary, the wise men, and the Nazis to finish them off. For Rosemary, the familial love that the children have had for one another and for their parents was more than she could accept: "The Nazis are after you. My greatest grief was your life together. My greatest grief."<sup>40</sup> The suffering of these children at the hands of Rosemary, the Nazis, the church exposes imperialist racist cultures and suggests some of the possible egregious effects delivered upon communities globally as the international nature of these ominous white figures suggests. Such a global view rather than complicate the empowered/disempowered dichotomy seems more to re-inscribe it. This again raises the notion of Kennedy's broader view of racism, taking the discussion beyond the fixed dichotomy of American black/white racial politics so insistently central to black nationalist aesthetics.

The description of the character Rosemary, in addition to her actions, signifies her power. Rosemary is described by Brother Rat (Blake) as

the prettiest girl in our neighborhood. It is one of those midwestern neighborhoods, Italians, Negroes and Jews. Rosemary always went to Catechism and wore Holy Communion dresses.... Where are you going Rosemary? We say. And she says, "I have to go to Catechism." Why do you always go to Catechism? "Because I am Catholic"; then thinking, she says, "Colored people are not Catholics, are they...? Well I am. I am a descendant of the Pope and Julius Caesar and the Virgin Mary." Julius Caesar? "Yes, Caesar was the Emperor of all Italia...." We wish we were descendants of this Caesar, we said, how holy you are, how holy and beautiful. She smiled.<sup>41</sup>

As a privileged representation of western culture, Rosemary is equated with three icons of white imperialism: the Pope, signifying Christian power; Julius Caesar, military conquest; and the Virgin Mary, pure white womanhood. Each of these ideological images constructs Brother Rat and Sister Rat (Kay) in much the same predicament as Sarah in *Funnyhouse*, longing to be a part of what they recognize as desirable and cannot attain (whiteness) while rejecting what they believe will eventually destroy them and what they cannot escape (blackness/ratness).

But their conflict is not as simple as the rat-children may conceive it to be. Their ratness is not so much tied to their skin as it is to their sin, a sin against family and self, and Rosemary is the instigator of this sin. Her most striking descriptive feature indicates her culpability. Beautiful Rosemary dressed in white has worms in her hair. The invocation of the mythical Medusa here suggests the destructive power toward life and vitality that Rosemary wields:

Brother Rat. Rosemary was our best friend and taught us Latin and told us stories of Italy. O Rosemary songs.... It was the beginning of summer. Just getting dark, we were playing and Rosemary said let's go to the playground. After you lay down on the slide so

innocently Rosemary said if I loved her I would do what she said. Oh Kay.... Now there is snow on the playground, ambulances are on every street and within every ambulance is you Kay going to the hospital with a breakdown....

Sister Rat. O Holy Music return.... I have a rat's belly.

Brother Rat. On the slide she said, Blake I'm bleeding. Now there is blood on the aisle of our church. Before rat blood came onto the slide we sailed. We did not swing in chains before blood, we sang with Rosemary.... Rosemary will you not atone us...? Rosemary will forever be atop the slide exalted with worms in her hair....

Rosemary. I will never atone you. Perhaps you can put a bullet in you head with your father's shotgun, then your holy battle will be done.<sup>42</sup>

Significantly, Rosemary's culpability is indistinguishable from that of God, who also suggests to Blake "perhaps you must put a bullet in your head then your battle will be done."<sup>43</sup> Her exhortations, like those of the procession and of God, distinguish these figures as conducting their own kind of ritual within the workings of the rats' mass, a ritual that reaffirms western power and reifies the rats' position as Other.

The figures also take on more specific implications when seen through an American prism. Kennedy indicates in her play that American racism is also very much the focus of her poetic discussion when she has Brother Rat exclaim,

beyond my rat head I see a new Capitol where Great Kay and I will sing. But no within my shot head I see the dying baby Nazis and Georgia relatives screaming girls cursing boys a dark sun and my grave.<sup>44</sup>

Kennedy constructs here a deeply troubling representation of the power of white racism situated more specifically in the American south and its institutions. The Christian church, often implicated in the workings of American racial oppression, is



implicated here as one of many horrible tools of American racial envy and racist oppression.

Interestingly enough, Kennedy's images of whiteness in *A Rat's Mass*, while seeming to reinforce the white/black binary that claims a civilized, logical, powerful whiteness constructed in its opposition to a primitive, irrational, emotional nature of blackness, are in fact both confounded and affirmed by representations of blackness that intend to refuse the oppositional nature of that binary. In her plays all of the black characters engage in a struggle for logical synthesis of self, an ironic movement, ritualistically, toward rational meaning. The fact that Sarah and the Rats cannot resolve their dilemmas by becoming completely black or renouncing their blackness and becoming "completely white" or "whitelike," which is the unattainable solution that the underpinning ideology demands, reiterates the ambiguous and impossible position of the African-American in a racist American society. The binary both produces and polices the limits of its expectations, and even challenges to the binary can insinuate themselves into reproducing it. Thus although Kennedy attempts to use the interstitial as a space of radical action, she also cannot completely evade the reinscribing dangers therein.

Blackness and its white masking in this play are "unruly" in that they serve Kennedy's purpose as a form of protest, interrogating the social ills of America in a way not pursued by other black revolutionary dramatists. Through their premise that the essence of black power exists primarily in separatist

political movement, the works of black revolutionary playwrights were heavily informed by the precepts of black nationalists such as Ron Karenga who emphasized rather than subverted already existing white/black binaries.<sup>45</sup> The African concept of art as functional lent itself well to their argument that the utility of black art resided in its capacities for exploitation as a device of revolutionary purpose.

Conversely, Kennedy refuses exploitative, didactic expectations of black revolutionary drama, a refusal which in some ways answers to her relevance and appeal in succeeding generations of audiences. She also re-interprets the boundaries of performance, particularly in her unique vision of African ritual. This vision adapts African and African-American performance ritual in her use of language and dramatic form. For example, in most of her early plays, Kennedy develops repeated and revised litanies as her characters' speech; the characters often call and respond to one another indirectly, shifting vocabulary, phraseology or syntax of their speeches as their interaction progresses. In *Funnyhouse*, for instance, Sarah's early speech as the Negro begins,

mostly [I] spend my days preoccupied with the placement and geometric position of words on paper.... It is my dream to live in rooms with European antiques...to eat my meals on a white glass table.... My white friends, like myself, will be shrewd, intellectual, and anxious for death. Anyone's death, I will mistrust them, as I do myself, waver in the opinion of myself. But if I had not wavered in my opinion of myself then my hair would never have fallen out....<sup>46</sup>

Later in the play, however, nearer to her final personal disintegration, her language, this time spoken through Sarah's Lumumba identity, takes new form:

mostly I spend my vile days preoccupied with the placement and geometric position of words on paper.... It is my vile dream to live in rooms with European antiques.... It is also my nigger dream for my friends to eat their meals on a white glass table.... My white friends, like myself, will be shrewd intellectuals and anxious for death. Anyone's death. I will despise them as I do myself. For if I did not despise myself then my hair would not have fallen out....<sup>47</sup>(my emphasis)

Through ritualistic repetition and revision of language, Kennedy revises meaning in Sarah's self scrutiny. She comes to see her European dreams as vile, and for the first time, she shifts from calling herself Negro to naming herself "nigger," mirroring her father who is named "nigger" on numerous occasions in the text. Her self-perception has altered irreversibly, and such violent alteration precipitates her suicide. Repetition with revision is here one of many examples in Kennedy's plays and mirrors African and African-American communicative ritual, from communal dance to blues/jazz techniques, building through a slow progression of image shifting and startling new meaning out of subtle commentary.

Form also exhibits a similar incorporation of ritual as structure for Kennedy's plays. In *The Owl Answers* (1965), the constant repeated opening and closing of subway doors allows the play to progress and regress from scene to scene, from past to present and back; sometimes Clara is on a New York subway, or at the Tower of London; at other moments she is in a hotel room or in St. Peter's church. Kennedy's stage directions demonstrate a

fluidity contained within a still recognizable structure of the play:

the scene is a New York subway is the Tower of London is a Harlem hotel room is St. Peter's.... The scene should lurch, lights flash, gates slam. When THEY come in and exit they move in a manner of people on a train, too there is the noise of the train, the sound of moving steel on the track.... The gates, the High Altar, the ceiling and the Dome are like St. Peter's, the walls are like the Tower of London.

Again the movement in and out of scenes and settings and the slow repetitious building of meaning through the interaction between Clara and characters who enter and exit this subway are reminiscent of African and African-American ritual performance. To shape audience perception, Kennedy consistently relies on such repetition and revision, fluidity within structure, and ambiguous shifts in meaning in her plays. This ritual approach is often overlooked or misunderstood and is perhaps why uninitiated or unsensitized reader/spectators find Kennedy's works both inaccessible and fascinating.

#### Black Female Materiality

Performative ambiguity as an unavoidable element of black female identity is convincingly evident in Kennedy's examination of the male/female binary in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and her later play *The Owl Answers*. Kennedy observably attempts to dissolve unified, performative gendered subjectivities. Daringly original as a black revolutionary dramatist for her time and anticipatory of theorists of gendered subjectivity such as Judith Butler, she creates boldly fluid, multiple racial and gendered identities as her protest pieces against intra/interracial sexism, or

oppression of black women within and outside of the black community. This sliding in and out of identities as a manner of interrogating sexism in black as well as white social economies may also have played a significant role in her lack of acceptance as a black revolutionary playwright, since the concerns of most male black revolutionary playwrights were actually framed in a privileging of masculinity.

Radicality in black arts of the 1960s and 1970s was frequently equated with manhood and was often expressed through masculinist discourse. For example, in discussing the black writer's responsibility, Ed Bullins argues that the black playwright needs to be "honest...and not become prematurely emasculated by the prospect of not being produced because of his race."<sup>48</sup> In the same manner, LeRoi Jones/Imamu Baraka argues that before black revolutionary aesthetics prevailed "for the Negro writer...to be a writer was to be cultivated, in the stunted bourgeois sense of the word. It was to be a quality black man."<sup>49</sup> In his answer to the "weak, heinous elements of culture that spawned" such writing, Jones/Baraka demands that unlike in earlier Negro writing "the Revolutionary Theatre should flush the fags and murders [sic] out of Lincoln's face.... [Its] heroes will be Crazy Horse, Denmark Vesey, Patrice Lumumba, and not history, not memory, not sad sentimental groping for a warmth in our despair; these will be new men, new heroes...."<sup>50</sup>

But the most clearly masculinist rhetoric in black revolutionary discourse is evident in examinations of the search for black equality and/or revolution itself. An understanding of

freedom and power seems in this discourse most attainable from within a debate as to who is really man enough. As bell hooks argues in *Black Looks*, "Contemporary black power movement made synonymous black liberation and the effort to create a social structure wherein black men could assert themselves as patriarchs, controlling community, family, and kin"<sup>51</sup> In effect, Jones/Baraka dedicates his whole article "American Sexual Reference: Black Male" to examining the importance of placing manhood in the struggle for racial equality. Jones/Baraka argues that

manhood is deemed the ability to oppress by the white man. At least one is more of a man in the sense of being self-sufficient, able to provide for yourself and your family. The last words...spoken by a black soldier after his wife is outraged by white men is, simply, 'I ain't no man.' That is, I cannot provide or protect.<sup>52</sup>

He clarifies this description by saying

the black man in America has always been expected to function as less than a man; this was taken for granted, and was the ugliest weight of his enslavement.... The slave master could make it with any black woman he could get to. The black man was powerless to do anything to prevent it; many times he was even powerless to keep his woman with him, or his children.<sup>53</sup>

Although certainly a valid argument in terms of the lack of power, the helplessness, and the damage to his manhood that the black man must have felt in these situations, Baraka fails to include in this examination of the sexes and oppression the clearly gender-determined experiences of rape, enforced pregnancy, and involuntary separation that black women experienced first hand as the weight of their enslavement.

Baraka's is an attack on white masculinity that "did not mean that black men were attacking normative masculinity, [rather] they were simply pointing out that white men had not fulfilled the ideal."<sup>54</sup> In this case the black woman's perspective is silenced. And the question of reproducing certain oppressions is suppressed. More pointedly, as bell hooks examines other black nationalist authors implicated in these sexist stances, she particularly singles out George Jackson and concludes that:

Jackson felt black males would need to embrace...use of violence if they hoped to defeat white adversaries. And he is particularly critical of black women for not embracing these notions of masculinity.... A frighteningly fierce misogyny informs Jackson's rage at black women, particularly his mother. Even though he was compelled by black women activists to reconsider his position on gender...his later work, *Blood in My Eye*, continues to see black liberation as a "male thing," to see revolution as a task for men.<sup>55</sup>

Larry Neal dramatizes this "rage at black women" in his analysis of a play which depicts black women as political metaphors of destruction bent upon the demise of black manhood and, concomitantly, black freedom. In describing Jimmy Garrett's black revolutionary play *We Own the Night*, Neal observes that "in African-American literature of previous decades the strong Black mother was the object of awe and respect. But in the new literature her status is ambivalent and laced with tension"<sup>56</sup> In the play the black militant protagonist, Johnny, is wounded and when his mother pleads for him to leave the militants, stop fighting against whites, and find safety, Johnny berates her for emasculating his father and attempting to do the same to him. In the last scene of the play he shoots his mother, proclaiming this

act as proof and preservation of his manhood. Neal continues his analysis of this play by observing that in black families

African-American women have had to be economic mainstays of the family. The oppressor allowed them jobs while at the same time limiting the economic mobility of Black men. Very often...the [black] woman's aspirations and values are closely tied to those of the white power structure and not to those of her man. Since he cannot provide for his family the way white men do, she despises his weakness, tearing into him at every opportunity until, very often, there is nothing left but a shell. The only way out of this dilemma is through revolution. It either must be an actual blood revolution, or one that physically redirects the energy of the oppressed.... The revolutionary imperative demands that men step outside the legal framework. The old constructs do not hold up, because adhering to them means consigning oneself to the oppressive reality. [In the play] Johnny's mother is involved in the old constructs. Manliness is equated with white morality. And even though she claims to love her family (her men), the overall design of her ideas are against black manhood. In Garrett's play the mother's morality manifests itself in a deep-seated hatred of Black men.<sup>57</sup>

Again black manhood is identified here as that element of blackness which must be saved at all costs, and in this instance black women are identified as complicit partners in the enslavement and destruction of the black man. Only two examples of many such arguments, these male authors clearly demonstrate the necessity of a voice for black women in the black revolutionary dramatic movement.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the fact that few acknowledged her presence, Kennedy, continuing the earlier attempts of black women playwrights such as Lorraine Hansberry and Alice Childress, offered to the silenced African-American woman a drama centered on the experiences of black women in a racist environment. Kennedy's drama transcended the known label of black



revolutionary by attempting to performatively write into existence the consciousness and experiences of oppressed black women. This is Kennedy's observable attempt at addressing black female absence/silence and/or displacement in American racial and sexual politics, thus marking her drama as revolutionary on several levels.

The interrogation of gender boundaries is one of the most striking ways in which Kennedy introduces her discussion of sexual positionality as relating to forms of oppression as well as moves toward protest and revolution. In *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, two female selves of Sarah (Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg) exist as expressions of Sarah's blind approbation of whiteness. Through these characters Kennedy conjures up the specter of colonial domination which is the root of Sarah's and her mother's conflicting identities as mulattos.

More personally for Sarah, these selves (unlike their mother who is weak, rejecting, and insane) suggest female strength and power as figures of white European royalty. Yet their white female power exists primarily in their immovable masks. Kennedy structures these "white" selves as defective images, their force deriving from colonial, patriarchal dominance. And, as their comments illustrate when Victoria exclaims, "I am tied to the black Negro," and the Duchess responds, "We are tied to him,"<sup>59</sup> they are unable to deny their connection to blackness and to maleness which are for them both inauthentic and essential to their constructions of self. Sarah must confront this blackness that is "evil and has been from the

beginning" and is the "wilderness."<sup>60</sup> Sarah's female selves dread the coming of their father as "the blackest of them all,"<sup>61</sup> for he is for them the black rapist who ostensibly threatens the whiteness in their womanhood, like that of their mother.

Kennedy studies through this black rape image the complex workings of Sarah as, in the sense of Teresa de Lauretis's terms, a "subject constituted in gender."<sup>62</sup> De Lauretis refers here to a subjectivity that is constructed not only by difference in sex but also by language and culture, a "subject en-gendered in the experiencing of race and class, as well as, sexual relations."<sup>63</sup> Kennedy anticipates de Lauretis's observation by at least twenty years when the playwright insists in this 1964 play that Sarah, as a woman and as a mulatto, be seen as both gendered and racialized. Sarah emerges as a confluence of sexism and racism, subject to oppressions that are multifaceted and complicated further by her inability to definitively identify herself racially.

In addition, ideological fear of black rape conjoins Sarah to white women as objects of male desire in general and as particularly vulnerable to black male sexual violence. Yet in her rehearsal of white (fe)male fear of black male sexuality, Sarah ultimately participates in the construction of a white womanhood which at the same time eludes her. Kennedy seems to suggest here that such European female figures of power as those that inhabit Sarah's identity conflate as sites for issues of gender, race, and colonial domination. These figures emerge as loci for the play of power in contemporary global experiences of patriarchal

imperialism and racism. They offer Sarah a false sense of strength against the threat of her black father, reaffirmed by and reaffirming Sarah's fear of and revulsion for the black father who ironically represents physical domination informed by race.

Kennedy further complicates issues of gender and race by challenging the notion of gender as mere sexual difference, perhaps in answer to the masculinist discourse of black nationalists like Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, and again employing the interstitial space as a subversive location. She does this through two male figures, Man/Lumumba and Jesus, collapsing constructed genders to expose Sarah's ironic fascination with blackness and her confused acceptance/rejection of white colonial Christian tradition.

Sarah's self as Man (appearing initially as the "Man," then the "unidentified Man," and subsequently the "Man (Patrice Lumumba) is the first male fragment of her conflicted and conflicting identity(ies).<sup>64</sup> In creating this male self, Kennedy precipitates a gender shift that suggests Sarah's intense, reluctant need to in some ways accept, be one with, or be her father, to embrace his blackness and his African heritage. As a result, Sarah also suffers an excruciating distancing from the authentic female, who for her is everything her mother was not: white, powerful, European, representing dominance.

Through transgressing gender boundaries, Sarah begins to maneuver within social relations of her racial, gendered subjectivity and to view her world differently. She leaves a

tenuous sense of security underwritten by whiteness-as-the-familiar, female, dominant, and enters the "wilderness" of her blackness which she equates with the maleness of her father and of Man/Lumumba. This final gravitation toward a blackness that she cannot reconcile with her whiteness, toward a maleness that she cannot effectively relate to her femaleness, aggravates Sarah's self-hatred causing her hair to fall out and, ultimately, pressing her to suicide. She moves away from merely mistrusting to despising her white friends and to destroying whiteness as herself, a whiteness that is in her imagination decidedly Western and female.

Also, representation of a gendered fluidity in *Funnyhouse* of a *Negro* clearly challenges the male/female dichotomy. Jesus-as-Sarah might take on the male authority of western Christian traditions. However, if such occurs, this power is rendered warped and grotesque by the character's description: "Jesus is a hunchback, yellow-skinned dwarf, dressed in white rags and sandals."<sup>65</sup> Characterizing this Christian icon, this ultimate male symbol of the Christian church, as a corrupted, faded vision is merely the beginning of Kennedy's subversion and conversion of Jesus into a figure that will convey the complexities of racism and sexism. Jesus-as-Sarah attempts frantically to negotiate his position in the in-between. His hair, like that of all of Sarah's selves, is falling out rapidly. He and the Duchess are forced to try to prevent further losses:

Jesus. My hair(*The Duchess does not speak, Jesus again screams.*) My hair.... (*Holding [his] hair up, waiting for a reaction from the Duchess.*)

Duchess. When I awakened I found it fallen out, not all of it but a mass that lay on my white pillow. I could see, although my hair hung down at the sides, clearly on my white scalp it was missing.... *She sits on the bench next to Jesus and starts to comb her remaining hair over her baldness.... Jesus then takes the comb and proceeds to do the same to the Duchess of Hapsburg's hair.*<sup>66</sup>

These selves of Sarah as male and female are irrepressibly linked by their loss. As two figures historically implicated in the proliferation of European cultural dominance, both Jesus and the Duchess create for Sarah a moment for staving off the impending arrival of blackness as a real part of her psychic existence.

Yet, at the same time, for Sarah, the threat of blackness produces and consumes the effect of boundaries, reverses and subverts the elusive limits of her racialized and sexualized hierarchy. Sarah sees her mother as a beautiful victim of black male violence, and fears the same for herself. A deformed, emasculated, yellow Jesus in some ways might nullify the power of the male, of Christian colonial dominance, often seen as male--for example, consider the rape metaphor as descriptive of the colonization of the third world--and, ultimately, of black male sexism.

Conflation of the male and female characters Sarah, Lumumba, Jesus, Victoria, and the Duchess renders permeable fixtures of race and gender and offers Sarah a chance at new but unavoidably painful negotiations of her "beyond." Jesus and the Duchess are selves who work to comprehend an unmanageable blackness and femaleness as they speak together:

Duchess and Jesus. (*Their hair is falling more now, they are both hideous.*) My father isn't going to let

us alone. Our father is the darkest of us all, my mother was the fairest, I am in between, but my father is the darkest of them all. He is a black man. Our father is the darkest of them all. He is a black man. My father is a dead man.<sup>67</sup>

Jesus speaks of his father as black and as dead. Clearly Kennedy is stripping away layers of cultural tradition, blasting the sacred here in order to present the radical nature of the materiality of race which, despite all attempts at camouflage, surfaces and resurfaces in European post-colonial consciousness.

And Kennedy exposes Sarah's conflicting subjectivity by virtue of her racial, sexual position situated in opposition to the relations of power in a white Christian tradition. At one time a formidable force in colonial and patriarchal dominance of the Western world, the Christian church is associated here, like Sarah, with a loss of force compared to its past. This is implied by the physical and emotional deformity of Jesus-as-Sarah. The yellow Jesus is uncertain of his heritage. He is a perverted, murderous savior who is disillusioned by his racial as well as divine identity:

through my apocalypses and my raging sermons I have tried so to escape him, through God Almighty I have tried to escape being black.... I am going to Africa to kill this black man named Patrice Lumumba. Why? Because all my life I believed my Holy Father to be God, but now I know that my father is a black man. I have no fear for whatever I do, I will do in the name of God, I will do in the name of Albert Saxe Coburg, in the name of Victoria, Queen Victoria Regina, the monarch of England, I will.<sup>68</sup>

Kennedy interrogates through this character the historicized Christ, his divinity, his appropriation by European imperialist culture, the motivations of a Christian presence in Africa, and

the more personal ramifications of those Christian traditions that have in part constructed Sarah's conflicted subjectivity.

In the same moment, in his language the character Jesus-as-Sarah privileges white domination, again emphasizing the white female colonial figure. Jesus's mocking oath of loyalty to European aristocracy and royalty, in effect the Eurocentric patriarchal domain as colonizing force, exposes Sarah's morbid struggle with an ideology that will not allow her to embrace her bi-racial, bi-cultural selves. Ironically this privileging of whiteness is also undercut by his affirmation of the Christian Holy Father as a "black man." Jesus declares that "whatever I do, I will do in the name of God..., I will do in the name of Victoria..." His confusion of loyalties reiterates the confusions of Sarah who is blinded by the "bi's" (bi-racial, bi-cultural) of her life. Ultimately, Kennedy, without allowing such metaphors to be simply consumed, examines black female interstitiality and represents even more complexly what bell hooks describes as "gendered metaphors for colonization where "racism and sexism are interlocking systems of domination which uphold and sustain one another."<sup>69</sup>

Another male self, Patrice Lumumba serves as an imposing figure of black male power. Ironically named earlier by Baraka as a male hero of revolution, Lumumba becomes for Kennedy a source of revolutionary action as both a male and female figure. Patrice Lumumba is the distant significantly male and powerful sign of African presence, of African revolutionary figures. As the first prime minister of the Congo who was eventually assassinated,

Lumumba is a convincing representation of resistance to colonization, and the emergence of hard-fought independence. Where Jesus as a male Sarah figure is a repository of white Christian colonial domination and power, Lumumba-as-Sarah suggests a new kind of power, contradicting the image of a colonized, castrated black male. But as Jesus is deformed, weakened, irresolute, so too Lumumba roams the play as disempowered; sporting a split skull, he is both mournful and murdered.

Thus an ambiguity in Sarah's efforts at resolution remains. Her inability to successfully work toward integrating these selves situates her in a culturally precarious position as child, parent, male, female, oppressor and oppressed. Sarah as child embodies the vulnerability and impotence of the victimized, while as parent she searches for ways to comprehend and address the complexities of her victimization. As both male and female, Sarah exposes and confronts the dimensions of sexism in the workings of racism. Also in her acceptance, and in fact perverted, glorification of dominant European racial ideologies, she in some ways participates in her own oppression. This entanglement of locations exposes the debilitating effects of oppressive "strategies of power" and their impact on the presence, identity and psychological health of African-American women. Thus Kennedy engages questions of self-incrimination, disempowerment, gender and sexuality as evident in the re-production of racism and as working forces in the creation of racialized female subjectivity.



Mining the Riches of Ritual

For Kennedy, the inclusion in her works of ritual informed by African cultural performance is an attempt to address African-American experience in a way that straddles generational, racial, and gendered boundaries and to address such experiences through evocation of active response on the part of black audiences. Taking the perspective of audience, communal, ritualized drama can become for artists a "move beyond explicit theater contexts...[to] confront performance issues within structures of power."<sup>70</sup> Performance thus can induce audience response that may engage new ways of negotiating those elements of racism Kennedy is intent upon interrogating and perhaps even work toward the more "balanced matrix" of life envisioned from within an African ontology.

However, Kennedy also acknowledges through the un-resolvable fragmentation of her characters and the often inaccessible complexities of her texts that such communal balance is an idealized pursuit. Ritual in Kennedy's drama can be seen to examine the traditional African-centered role of community as a major force in addressing the threats of racial and sexual oppressions. It can also be seen as an African-American adaptation of African wariness of any threats to the balance of living. But, at the same time, ritual in Kennedy's works through its litanies of language and repetitious placement of characters, symbols, and settings reminds us of the incomprehensible nature of human experiences, particularly for those relegated to liminal spaces.

Ritual drama for Kennedy transcends agit-prop dimensions of black revolutionary theater; its dynamic is African-informed as it differentiates from, yet synthesizes, African art aesthetics with Euro-American experimental dramatic form. While her use of ritual denounces and degrades, as with other black revolutionary dramatists, American racial and sexual oppression, her drama also attempts through a personal, yet empowering and cautious vision to encourage black audiences to actualize, and to problematize their racial consciousness. In addition, unlike the ritual drama of most known black revolutionary playwrights, the ritualistic violence and the textual refusals of Kennedy's plays frighteningly rehearse the destructive, exclusive powers of personal and cultural ignorance, while they courageously attempt to reaffirm those qualities of strength in the face of insurmountable odds and hope for future generations so clearly emphasized in an African social philosophy of balanced living.

Kennedy's drama offers, then, both a lyrical and violent mystification of the nature and form of community as limiting and, ideally, balanced, or as an antithesis of the nightmare isolation and warped relations that are portrayed in her plays. Incorporating ritualized language and form toward both a revelation of truth and evocation of cultural understanding, her plays both invite and complicate assent from within the black audience toward its own kind of community. Here Kennedy plumbs the iterative power of ritual performance, as in the privileging of repetition and revision, in the (re)making of social culture. She addresses the integral part of family and community in

African forms of social preservation by confronting and emphasizing communal/familial issues in African-American life, and, consequently, investigates the ways in which racial oppression can and has threatened the integrity of the black family/community.

Ritual is strongly evident in *The Owl Answers* where Kennedy has her fractured character Clara—who-is-the-Virgin-Mary—who-is-the-Bastard—who-is-the-Owl illustrate through a series of ritualistic acts and experiences--lighting candles, visiting cultural shrines, repeating litanies, preparing a sacrificial bed--the horrifying effects of racialized female existence and its disruption of the self as part of community. Clara's owlness at first seems to be an indication of her position as a mixed-raced bastard. Clara exclaims "He was the Richest White Man in our Town. I was conceived by him and somebody that cooked for him."<sup>71</sup> Although Clara's shame is ostensibly ameliorated when she is adopted by the black preacher Reverend Passmore and his wife, her owlness somehow is augmented. As an adult she ultimately seeks "Love or something" and demonstrates this search by her frequent trips on the subway looking for Negro men to take to hotels.<sup>72</sup>

Yet this reality of the Clara figure is disrupted continuously by the intermittent appearances on the subway of historical English figures such as William Shakespeare, Chaucer, William the Conqueror who represent the European heritage of Clara's white father; her two mother figures, frequently confused with the image of Anne Boleyn; her father as Rich White Man, God,

Reverend Passmore, and Dead White Man; and, finally, images of birds: the White Bird, the Canary, God's Dove, and various figurations of Owls. Clara's interactions with these figures reveals through ritual speech and act the unavoidable connection of her sex with the oppression she must endure. Through the actions of Clara's Bastard's Black Mother, who is also at times the Reverend's Wife, the complexity of Clara's owlness is slowly revealed. Clara attempts, through her final murderous act of violence against the black man in the hotel, to face the ramifications of her racial, familial past as a woman, as well as a Negro.

Unmasking Clara's anguish slowly through ritual language and action, Kennedy reiterates here the importance of African-inspired ritual through movement, rhythm, and song in her depiction of Clara's dilemma. Ritual movement is effected as her figures rehearse again and again acts that seem to magnify their anguish. Clara, a teacher, consults notebooks and papers, shuffles, drops, picks them up, and commences again the same sequence, consistently throughout the play. Her actions continuously remind the reader of the first level of reality of this character and make all the more striking the bizarre encounters she has with the other figures of the play.

The White Father "removes his hair, takes off his white face, from the chair he takes a white church robe and puts it on. Beneath his white hair is dark Negro hair," and he thus transforms into Reverend Passmore.<sup>73</sup> The Reverend will himself repeatedly light candles, extinguish them, light them again, and

read his White Bible. He then transforms back into the White father who himself will die numerous times, yet live to extinguish the candles at the end of the play.

Even more significantly, the Reverend's wife will metamorphosize into the Bastard's Black Mother and back into herself, acquiring features of an owl; she will eventually be "part the black mother and part the REVEREND'S WIFE in a white dress, wild kinky hair, part feathered" and will build with her feathers, and a bed, the High Altar of sacrifice.<sup>74</sup> Ultimately, it is through this multiple female figure that some sense can be made out of Clara's jumbled self.

The mother figures in this play equate their womanhood with the depth of their oppression. While owlness originally seems to be Clara's state of illegitimacy, Clara also is the biracial issue of white/black relations where her blackness is as subject to derision as is her existence as bastard. Yet as the mother figures develop their ritual of sacrifice, a heightened state of owlness is revealed. Bastard's Black Mother attempts early to explain Clara's predicament to her:

Clara, I am not Anne. I am the Bastard's Black mother, who cooked for somebody...Clara, you were conceived by your Goddamn Father who was The Richest White Man in the Town and somebody who cooked for him. That's why you're an owl. (Laughs) That's why when I see you, Mary, I cry. I cry when I see Marys, cry for their deaths.<sup>75</sup>

This sudden shift from laughter to crying, from the recognition of her daughter as Clara to that of her as Virgin Mary begins the ritualistic revelation of Clara's dilemma through repetitive language and image.

Both mother figures extend the ritual as their incantatory language irrevocably identifies one with the other. The Reverend's Wife continues the slow revelation:

(REVEREND'S WIFE takes a vial from her gown and holds it up.) These are the fruits of my maidenhead, owl blood Clara who is the Bastard Clara Passmore to whom we gave our name, see the owl blood, that is why I cry when I see Marys, cry for their deaths, Owl Mary Passmore.<sup>76</sup>

As the mothers cry for the Marys, owlness is more and more equated with loss of virginity and the sex act, whether a consummation of marriage or a coerced event, and with a worldly wisdom attained through pain. And sexuality is more and more identified with Clara's derangement.

Reference to the violent act of rape completes the revelation. The suggestion that Bastard's Black Mother was raped by her white employer, and Clara is the bastard result of this violent sexual act, re-presents the multiplicity of oppressions experienced by black women in America. Bastard's Black Mother's experience is reminiscent of that of the slave woman and emphasizes the powerlessness of black women at the hands of white men. But Kennedy extends this consideration even further in the portrayal of the Reverend's wife, who has rejected the sexual advances of the Reverend:

I told the Reverend if he ever came near me again... *(She turns the butcher knife around.)* Does he not know I am Mary, Christ's bride? What does he think? Does he think I am like your black mother who was the biggest whore in town? He must know I'm Mary.<sup>77</sup>

The ironic, judgmental statement of the Reverend's wife condemns Clara's mother and blames the victim. Vestiges of the cult of

true womanhood are implied here as still encouraging the chastity of the white woman, her lack of sexuality as her badge of worthiness. In her criticism of the raped black mother and in her rejection of her own husband, the Reverend's Wife re-enacts for herself a destructive rendition of a dated but potent patriarchal notion of true womanhood. Victimized by and in her own restricted womanhood, she, nevertheless, in some ways participates in the transmission of this ideology conceived out of white patriarchal dominance, while at the same time she cannot ever be a part of what she perpetuates. The question of the way in which the oppressed often participate in their own oppression is one more subtle example of Kennedy's perceptive examination of dominant relations of power. As the patriarchal concept of sexuality infiltrates Kennedy's African-American families, then, to use Jana Sawicki's words, "sex becomes a target for intervention into family life."<sup>78</sup> Although Sawicki was referring to a more generic white feminist representation of sexuality, the concept is applicable to black families when they have taken on the roles of patriarchal familial positions.

Both mother figures in *The Owl Answers* have been subjected to the violent advances of men and their anguish is culminated when the Reverend's wife merges with Bastard's Black Mother and turns to suicide as a remedy to her/their anguish. Clara also reveals her final secret experience of oppression:

he came to me in the outhouse, he came to me under the porch, in the garden, in the fig tree. He told me you are an owl, ow, ow, I am your beginning, ow. You belong here with us owls in the fig tree, not to

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somebody that cooks for your Goddam Father, oww, and I  
ran to the outhouse in the night crying oww.<sup>79</sup>

Subjected to the sexual advances of her adopted father, Clara exposes here the unspeakable subjugation of a young black girl to the violent sexual advances of a black man. Her cry of "oww" is one of physical and emotional pain. Because she cannot face the sexual act with the Negro man who has left with her from the subway, she ultimately attempts to stab him with the butcher knife on a burning bed of feathers, the High Altar built by her mother figures. Clara fails, and as the man escapes she, in the last moments of the play, "*(suddenly looks like an owl, and lifts her bowed head, stares into space and speaks:)* Ow...oww."<sup>80</sup> As Clara lifts her head from a bowed position and speaks her owl's words, she seems to indicate that this pain has finally become her wisdom. Clara, like the mythical wise old owl, has acquired through her anguished experience a recognition of the multiple oppressions wielded against African-American females in a racist, sexist society.

As in *Funnyhouse* and in *A Rat's Mass*, black female frigidity in *The Owl Answers* is closely related to violent acts of sex by black men. Intra-racial sexism is the ultimate source of Clara's disintegration. The acquisition of patriarchal attitudes toward black women by black men and the black community disrupts any semblance of balance in community and family, placing black womanhood in the position of culpability and disgrace and collapsing the ideal of productive community upon which African rituals rely.



Yet each of Kennedy's characters experiences final moments that harbor some sense of affirmation in addition to deeply rooted despair. In the final scene for Sarah in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, for example, the action occurs in Africa, as all of the selves, Jesus, Lumumba, the Duchess, and Victoria, converge and begin to speak simultaneously. With nimbuses atop their heads that "suggest that they are saviours," these characters reiterate the anguish that Sarah has consistently exhibited concerning her blackness throughout the play.<sup>81</sup>

Sarah's final inability to resolve the implications of their dark presence which insists upon her blackness leaves her with little alternative. Having been estranged from the reality of her mixed heritage, and socialized to reject the blackness of her self, her only alternative is self-destruction, and thus we finally "see her hanging in the room."<sup>82</sup> Sarah, without a reaffirmation of her selfhood and the blending of her cultures, is left bereft of that which could offer her the abilities to survive. Rather than continue to struggle toward the ethereal, otherworldly nature of her whiteness and away from the tangible existence of her blackness, she chooses death. In this choice she clearly demonstrates her lack, but also indicates a strength that will not allow her to lose herself completely in a world of dishonesty and self-compromise.

Similarly, the Rats in *A Rat's Mass* express a mixed message of hope and despair through their death by firing squad. In the play they have struggled for atonement, striving to move away

from their ratness which is an anatomy of blackness and guilt. As they die, their final incantation can be heard:

we will become headless and all will cease the dark  
sun will be bright no more and no more sounds of  
shooting in the distance. It will be the end.<sup>83</sup>

Their strength in the face of white oppression has produced in them an acknowledgment of some amelioration of their agony. In their death they see their rat heads as destroyed. The dark sun of oppression will no longer wield its brightness over them. They will not hear the shooting; all will be ended. In their strength they have in a sense defeated that which has attempted to dominate and destroy them. And most importantly, they have remained together throughout their ordeals. Their comfort and triumph comes from within their communal integrity.

These interpretations would, of course, fly in the face of those critics who see Kennedy's work as nihilistic. Yet positive Afrocentric examinations of Kennedy's themes might support evidence in her works of African privileging of communal reaffirmation through ritual. Kennedy's view of death in her characters in so many of her plays could be seen, not as a series of pessimistic, unsolveable, and thus, in a word, useless moments in the experience of the African-Americans, but rather as manifestations of cultural dignity, as the refusal of her characters to succumb completely to their struggles, exemplifying an unbending affirmation of future generations.

Paul Carter Harrison describes this special awareness in Kennedy's works as a realization of the *Nommo* force of African culture, arguing that her understanding of and emphasis in her

drama of ritual as a necessary force in an articulation with black audiences "prove[s] her to be one of the most inventive black dramatists on the Babylonian [American] scene."<sup>84</sup> Yet Kennedy uses African-inspired dramatic myth, a literary embodiment of African-American adaptations of African ontology, cosmology and art aesthetic, to infuse as well as defuse the tensions inherent in the interstitial spaces inscribed in American racism. She forcefully exposes through an ironic underpinning of violence and death what personal and communal identity should not be, offering as only one possible solution an understanding of human experience adapted from the philosophies of Africans such as the Dogon and the Akan peoples. In their world view, existence is not a determined linear experience but rather complex combinations, or as Harrison suggests, a matrix of influences that dynamically interact continuously within the life space. Individuals cannot address the complexities of existence singly, but must work through communal efforts to maintain a balance among the many elements in the matrix of life.<sup>85</sup> Family/community is the center of existence, and communal ritual reinforces its balance.

Kennedy is also careful not to romanticize or idealize the role of ritual in human experience. If ritual is reified, rigid, unchanging, as it often may be, community can then be a destructive force toward the individual. Ritual must move with the needs of a community, be "part and parcel of the rhythm of daily and seasonal life of the community...[as] an activity among other activities, often drawing its energy from those

activities."<sup>86</sup> The necessary dynamism of African-American adaptations of African cultural performance rituals attests to this. Kennedy's plays do not ultimately suggest an idealized characterization of community or ritual as simple solutions to the dilemmas of her characters either. Clearly, such romanticized representations of ritual, community, and Africa might be naïve and do not acknowledge the unavoidable assumption of the definitive outsider, the ineluctable existence of the liminal figure so painfully and consistently present in Kennedy's dramatic vision.

Still, Kennedy's characters, Sarah and Clara, fail at living because they are unable to "belong" somewhere. Their failure is exacerbated, if not caused, by the lack of reaffirming personal experience with others. And although Kennedy's portrayal of disengaged, isolated, and self-destructive characters, doomed by these qualities to failure and death, suggests that interaction with community is the most direct answer, the inaccessibility of her texts belies any ideal images of communal response, from audience, from cultural groups, from the human family. Kennedy's drama seems imminently uncertain as to any immediate resolution to African-American struggles against racism. Although family finds a prominent place in Kennedy's drama, in her vision the image of familial community is so often warped that much seems to be needed to remedy the pain and grief these families endure. Kennedy's dramatic form underwrites the complicated fabric of oppressed black families/communities and illustrates her notion

that there are no easy answers to the multiplicities of racism and sexism.

Although Kennedy has often been perceived as dwelling on an individualized version of oppression, as "self-preoccupied" and, therefore, unable to contribute to the understanding of the larger black community. Kennedy's characters do, however, through their various attempts at surviving a debilitating, intricately complex racial oppression, offer ways to engender in the audience a communal moment of understanding. At the same time the difficulties and consequent inaccessibilities of her radical dramatic form offer for the audience an experience of discomfort in existing on the outside.

Thus through unconventional dramatic precepts, Kennedy renders the African-American dramatic experience not as a spectacle to be observed by the audience but as a powerful engagement of that audience in terms of its own cultural and personal understanding. Her refusal of traditional American and African-American dramatic form and her incorporation of ritual as a device that both resists and appropriates elements of African culture, European avant-garde theater, and black revolutionary theater as ways of interrogating monolithic notions of black life initiates the development of a postmodern tenor in African-American drama. Kennedy thus sets the stage in many ways for continued developments in black women's drama, particularly Ntozake Shange's further investigations of masking as an interrogation of black identity and her intensive analysis of the dynamics of black communities, and Suzan-Lori Parks' examination

of community through language as she engages the tensions of vernacular and the written text.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> My understanding of performance and performativity is based on a number of texts that attempt to address the complexity of these two terms. I see performance as an event that operates within, aids in the construction of, and may effectively disrupt certain cultural requisites or performative constraints derived from ideological presumptions. In terms of the African-American women in Kennedy's plays, for example, performance that breaks the silence concerning inter/intra-racial sexism both foregrounds and challenges performative constructions of the subjugated position of black women in racist American social economies. For analysis of performance and performativity relevant to this discussion see Elin Diamond's *Performance and Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996); Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Adrienne Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro, In One Act* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 12. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Innes, *Avant-garde Theatre 1892-1992* (London: Routledge, 1993) 38-45.

<sup>4</sup> George E. Wellwarth, *The Theatre of Protest and Paradox* (New York: New York UP, 1971) 13, 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> Wellwarth, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Innes, 38-45.

<sup>7</sup> Innes, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Innes, 35.

<sup>9</sup> John S. Scott, "Teaching Black Drama," *Players Magazine* 47 (Feb.-Mar. 1972): 131.

<sup>10</sup> Adrienne Kennedy, *A Rat's Mass, In One Act* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 65. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>11</sup> Howard Taubman in his 1964 review of Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* describes this play more as a "vividly illustrated short story" where "nothing much happens according to conventional theatrical tenets, [but] a relatively unknown territory is explored and exposed." See *New York Times* (Ja 14) 24:7. In 1969 Clive Barnes describes Kennedy in his review of *A Rat's Mass* as "a strange and wildly poetic writer," *New York Times* (Nov. 1) 1:33, and reviewed *Cities in Beziqie* by asking "...were they plays? They had no beginning, no middle, no end, and yet they wrapped around the mind like strange tendrils.... They mean something, but what they mean is less than literally told—or perhaps more than literally told" *New York Times* (Ja 13) 26:1. Dan Sullivan describes *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *A Beast Story*, as "merely a long drone... a series of images

and soliloquies that do not grow in intensity but remain on the same level—a rather weakly-imagined one," *Los Angeles Times* (Dec. 22, 1972) 4:21.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Sontag declares in the *Partisan Review* that Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* "comes out of Genet's *The Blacks*; it is derivative, excessive, and full of mistakes," (Spring 1964) 31: 284. Genet and Kennedy do merit extended comparative study, yet there seems a racist assumption in arguing so simplistically that this one play's treatment of the issue of race and ostensible similarities in the use of mask symbology, for example, are the only devices for evaluating Kennedy drama, an African-American playwright with seemingly quite different concerns in her artistry from those of Genet.

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980) 127.

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, 119.

<sup>15</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 3.

<sup>16</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 3.

<sup>17</sup> As chapter two explains in detail, the drama of the Black Revolutionary Theater Movement was primarily informed by black nationalist philosophy which insisted that "all art must be revolutionary and in being revolutionary it must be collective, committing, and functional" (Karenga "On Black Art" 10). Black revolutionary aesthetics demanded that artists structure their visions toward the revolutionary needs of all of the black community and emphatically discouraged personal vision, or the pursuit of art for art's sake.

<sup>18</sup> For further information on the racio-cultural implications of American blackface minstrelsy see Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993); Robert Toll's *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1975).

<sup>19</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995) 137.

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Babcock-Abrahams, "'A Tolerated Margin of Mess': The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 11.3 (1975): 183.

<sup>21</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft*, 113.

<sup>22</sup> Toll, 43.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Dyer, "White," *Screen*, 29.4 (Autumn 1988): 46.

<sup>24</sup> Adrienne Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 3.



<sup>25</sup> Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Durham: Duke UP, 1930) 8.

<sup>26</sup> Wittke, 141.

<sup>27</sup> Wittke, 141.

<sup>28</sup> Wittke, 141.

<sup>29</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft*, 28.

<sup>30</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 5

<sup>34</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 1-2.

<sup>36</sup> Lott, *Love and Theft*, 124.

<sup>37</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Kennedy, *A Rat's Mass*, 61.

<sup>39</sup> For more information about Kennedy's references to personal experience see her autobiographical collage *People Who Led to My Plays* (New York: Knopf, 1987), introductions to her anthologies of plays *In One Act* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), *The Alexander Plays*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), and the introduction to her text *The Deadly Triplets: A Theatre Mystery and Journal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

<sup>40</sup> Kennedy, *A Rat's Mass*, 64.

<sup>41</sup> Kennedy, *A Rat's Mass*, 58.

<sup>42</sup> Kennedy, *A Rat's Mass*, 59-61.

<sup>43</sup> Kennedy, *A Rat's Mass*, 69.

<sup>44</sup> Kennedy, *A Rat's Mass*, 62.

<sup>45</sup> In his article "Black Art" Karenga argues that "[a]rt for art's sake is an invalid concept, all art reflects the value system from which it comes.... Black art initiates, supports and promotes change. It refuses to accept the values laid down by dead white men. It sets its own

values and re-enforces them with hard and/or soft words and sounds." See *Black Theatre* 4 (1970): 9-10.

<sup>46</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Ed Bullins, "Theatre of Reality," *Negro Digest* April (1966): 61.

<sup>49</sup> LeRoi Jones, "The Myth of 'Negro Literature,'" *The Saturday Review* April 20 (1963): 20.

<sup>50</sup> LeRoi Jones, "The Revolutionary Theatre" *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966) 211, 215. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>51</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992) 98.

<sup>52</sup> LeRoi Jones, "American Sexual Reference: Black Male," *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966) 218. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>53</sup> Jones, "American Sexual Reference," 221.

<sup>54</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 98.

<sup>55</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 99.

<sup>56</sup> Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review* 12 (Summer 1968): 38.

<sup>57</sup> Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," 38.

<sup>58</sup> Female black arts authors have also been viewed to some extent as contributors to the image of women in revolution as secondary. Their conflict stemmed from the notion that they had to choose between black freedom-fighting or the feminist movement, succumbing to the argument that the women's rights issue would disrupt a general thrust for equality for all blacks. bell hooks describes this dilemma: "Since the 1960's black power movement had worked over-time to let sisters know that they should assume a subordinate role to lay the groundwork for an emergent black patriarchy that would elevate the status of black males, women's liberation movement has been seen as a threat. Consequently, black women were and are encouraged to think that any involvement with feminism was/is tantamount to betraying the race" (*Black Looks* 101).

<sup>59</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 5,10.

<sup>61</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 3.

<sup>62</sup> de Lauretis, 2.

<sup>63</sup> de Lauretis, 2.

- <sup>64</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 11-12.
- <sup>65</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 7.
- <sup>66</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 16-17.
- <sup>67</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 16.
- <sup>68</sup> Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 19-20.
- <sup>69</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990) 57,59.
- <sup>70</sup> Diamond, 7.
- <sup>71</sup> Adrienne Kennedy, *The Owl Answers, In One Act* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 34. All further citations will be from this text.
- <sup>72</sup> Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, 36.
- <sup>73</sup> Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, 28.
- <sup>74</sup> Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, 43.
- <sup>75</sup> Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, 30.
- <sup>76</sup> Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, 30-31.
- <sup>77</sup> Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, 41.
- <sup>78</sup> Jana Sawicki, "Identity Politics and Sexual Freedom: Foucault and Feminism," *Feminism and Foucault*, eds. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1988) 182.
- <sup>79</sup> Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, 35.
- <sup>80</sup> Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, 45.
- <sup>81</sup> Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, 20.
- <sup>82</sup> Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, 22.
- <sup>83</sup> Kennedy, *A Rat's Mass*, 65.
- <sup>84</sup> Harrison, *The Drama*, 216.
- <sup>85</sup> Harrison, *The Drama*, xv.
- <sup>86</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, 1986 (London: James Curry, Ltd., 1988).

CHAPTER 3  
NTOZAKE SHANGE: RESISTANCE, POSTCOLONIALITY, AND CONTEMPORARY  
BLACK WOMEN'S DRAMA

By defying stereotypical narratives of African-American experience, Ntozake Shange contributes to the postmodern tenor of black drama. Beginning with her first play, which concerns issues of black women as a community negotiating within a larger black community, Shange strives, with each play that follows, for a sensitivity toward difference as operative in the articulations of black communities. But she does not shy away from addressing issues that confront black community as a kind of whole. Her work concentrates also on the experience of African-Americans as a colonized people within their own country and is heavily informed by theories of Frantz Fanon. In addition, like Kennedy, Shange finds a certain eloquence in adapting the ideological implications of masking, particularly blackface minstrelsy, as they are valuable to the examination and representation of black identity and community. Unlike Kennedy, however, Shange also relies significantly on developing her own theoretical essays to explore and challenge black drama. Ultimately, Shange's drama evolves into increasingly alienating forms, echoing Kennedy's groundbreaking development of dramatic form and language as attempting to represent what, again, Lyotard

terms as the "unrepresentable," those experiences of and responses to oppression which defy knowing.

In her essays, Shange expresses her disappointment in an American theater that is "overwhelmingly shallow/ stilted & imitative" of European tradition.<sup>1</sup> She continues that, for Americans, drama must reflect the experiences of an American people's culture developed out of its own identities, idiosyncrasies, and experiences. Even more crucial for African-Americans, she argues, a blind acceptance of European dramatic frameworks and an internalization of stereotypes, encouraged by an American racialized representation of black experience and culture, produces a gap between traditional American drama and those African-Americans with whom this drama may attempt to articulate.

Shange argues that for too long the African-American theater has been:

duped by the same artificial aesthetics that plague our white counterparts/ 'the perfect play,' as we know it to be/ a truly european framework for european psychology/ cannot function efficiently for those of us from this hemisphere.<sup>2</sup>

She suggests by the "perfect play" those aspects of American drama which call for realism; a beginning, middle, end; sympathetic or recognizable characters; straightforward action; or the entertainment of musicals; and she argues that these are inadequate for African-American dramatists. According to Shange, American drama for the most part, black or white, has not risen to the challenge of engaging African-

American life and culture seriously or effectively. In this sense, Shange seems much like avant-gardists who challenge traditional notions of western art. However, Shange's, like Kennedy's, protest is framed by a focused, particular set of human conditions. She emphasizes the political and economic status of African-Americans as a colonized people and immediately relevant to redefinition of black drama.

#### Clearing a Space

Shange's writing thus develops strategies for a new amenable drama capable of expressing diverse oppressions within African-American communities. Her approach diverges from an early black drama's legacy of concern for acceptable black images because she places the struggle of the black family in clearly socio-political terms, writing from a postcolonial perspective where the conflicts and aberrations that occur in the black community might be seen as a result of a "colonized" African-American mind.<sup>3</sup> Influenced by the essays of Frantz Fanon that consider the alienated colonized psyche, Shange's revolutionary dramatic literature manifests Fanon's anti-colonial precepts. Shange looks to Fanon's theories as she analyzes African-American communities, examining the struggles of African-American women within the broader postcolonial implications of the internal colonization of African-Americans in the U.S. Shange particularly stresses the theories of Frantz Fanon in terms of how these implications affect the lives of black women.

Shange's interest in Fanon is made clear in her text "Program Note." She conceives of an African-American socio-political history that is parallel to the histories of colonized peoples that Fanon describes in his analyses of colonial oppression. Shange finds Fanon's concepts close to her own:

in everything i have ever written & everything i hope to write/ i have made use of what Frantz Fanon called "combat breath." although Fanon was referring to francophone colonies, the schema he draws is sadly familiar<sup>4</sup>

Her work is informed by Fanon's attempt to address first the pathology of French/Algerian colonial conflict, and, by extrapolation, that of all colonized peoples. Shange makes reference to the following passage from his *A Dying*

*Colonialism*:

there is no occupation of territory, on the one hand, and independence of persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured, in the hope of final destruction. Under this condition, the individual's breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is combat breathing.<sup>5</sup>

Describing Fanon's vision of combat breathing as "the living response/the drive to reconcile the irreconcilable/the black & white of what we live and where," Shange relates her own ordeals and the difficult experiences of the whole community of African-Americans directly to that of Fanon's diagnosis of a pathological colonized people: "i have lived with this for 31 years/ as my people have lived with cut-off lives n limb." She continues by describing her writing as "the throes of pain n sensation experienced by my characters responding to the

involuntary constrictions of their humanity/ in the context of combat breathing."<sup>6</sup>

Fanon elaborates further in his text *A Dying Colonialism* on the psychological complications within communities that reel under the heavy weight of oppression. In his chapter "The Algerian Family," Fanon strikes at the heart of the pathologies of colonized families: deterioration of communication, individual neuroses, exaggerated distrust, displacement of authority. For example, he argues that:

the struggle for national liberation and the more and more total character of the repression have inflicted grave traumatism upon the family group: a father taken into custody in the street in front of his children, stripped along with them, tortured before their eyes;...a husband arrested, dragged away, imprisoned. The women are then left to find ways of keeping the children from starving to death.<sup>7</sup>

Shange suggests that placed within the context of a racist America, these descriptions of racial torture are strikingly applicable to the experience of both the historically enslaved and the later economically and politically oppressed African-American. Ironically, these same descriptions from Fanon can also serve effectively the ideologically biased images of the African-American family established so enthusiastically in social documents such as the Moynihan Report. Therein lies the difficulties of Fanon's reliance on psychoanalytical approach, difficulties which Shange does not, or does not choose to, see.

In either case, mirroring Fanon's vision of the prices that are paid in order to pursue independence, Shange creates



her own vision of a dramatic tradition that addresses, as Fanon insisted was essential, the devastation of oppression upon communities, in her case the African-American community. Like Kennedy, who emphatically addresses through the sensibilities of black female characters the immense consequences of the failure of African-American communities and of individual families to effectively deal with oppression, Shange addresses in her first play, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), the difficulties of black women and their communities as they face a racist, sexist environment. This play is a loosely constructed collection of poems, a "choreopoem" developed through the interaction of seven women as explorers and interpreters of black female experience within the black community.

*for colored girls...* and her other works, Shange declares, have been "directed toward clarifying our lives--& the lives of our mothers, daughters, & grandmothers--as women"<sup>8</sup> and toward "our struggle to become all that is forbidden by our environment, all that is forfeited by our gender, all that we have forgotten."<sup>9</sup> Particularly concerned with personal relationships in her drama, Shange creates primary characters who often reflect "combat breathing" through an inability to effectively communicate with each other and an inability to develop healthy emotional interaction among communities of black men and women.

The unhealthy occurrence of Black rape in her plays is, for example, a metaphor for black male acceptance of the western conceptualization of the dualism of the body or male/female representations of power. As the black male refuses the destructive interpretation of a racially marked body, he, as a rapist, at the same time relies on a Western assumption of hierarchical difference in the privileging of the black male body over the black female body. This is first most clearly examined by Shange in her "latent rapists'" poem of *for colored girls*... via the violent privileging of black male sexual power through the invasive act of raping the black female body. In this assumption the black male acknowledges a passive acceptance of the notion that "one and the same message, inscribed on a male or female body, does not always or even usually mean the same thing or result in the same text."<sup>10</sup> In other words, for the black male, blackness, as a Western inscription of disempowerment on the black body which must be challenged, outstrips the importance or even the acknowledgment of the similar disempowering marking of female, in this case black female, bodies. Here Shange strikes at the heart of the multiple oppressions of black women and the participation of black men in this double standard.

In *for colored girls*..., Shange addresses the occurrence of black-on-black rape directly. As an act which rehearses an "ideology of male supremacy" and "encourages and supports violence against women,"<sup>11</sup> black rape may be seen to occur in these cases as to "condone patriarchal affirmation of rape as

an acceptable way to maintain male domination."<sup>12</sup> Shange includes black rape in this play as a symptom of the black male's need to rehearse white male dominance as a reach for power or, again, as bell hooks argues, for a "male supremacy [that] encourages the use of abusive force to maintain male domination of women."<sup>13</sup> hooks continues, "it is this merging of sexuality with male domination within patriarchy that informs the construction of masculinity for men of all races and classes."<sup>14</sup> Shange looks to this behavior as an example of a male need for the acquisition of any power through the diminution of black mothers and daughters, consequently half of the black community, determining the division of a community which by all rights cannot survive effectively without a unity of purpose and activism.

As three of the female characters illustrate in the "latent rapists'" poem of *for colored girls...*, black males first cannot be excused for their sexual "misunderstanding[s]."<sup>15</sup> The ladies in red, purple, and blue share in the burden of expressing the extent to which black rape, experienced by black women as a manifestation of a rage for power, is initiated by black men to allow those men to enter the world of patriarchal dominance. Shange's use of a number of narrators for this poetic sequence and the sensuous nature of their identifying colors iterates the complexities of relations of power through an investment in sexual violence that undermines effective communication between black women and men. The poem begins:

lady in red	a rapist is always to be a stranger to be legitimate someone you never saw
lady in purple	a man wit obvious problems pin-ups attached to the insides of his lapels
lady in blue	ticket stubs from porno flicks in his pocket
lady in purple	a lil dick
lady in red	or a strong mother
lady in blue	or just a brutal virgin
lady in red	but if you've been seen in public wit him danced one dance kissed him good-bye lightly
lady in purple	wit closed mouth
lady in blue	pressin charges will be as hard as keepin yr legs closed while five fools try to run a train on you
lady in red	these men friends of ours who smile nice stay employed and take us out to dinner
lady in purple	lock the door behind you
lady in blue	wit fist in face to fuck

Rape here is clearly couched as a sexual act of violence.

There has been, however, much feminist debate as to whether rape should be interpreted primarily in sexual terms. Winifred Woodhull argues, for instance, that sex cannot be divorced from rape when comprehending its machinations within the operations of power. For Woodhull,

the urgency of analyzing the complex relations between sexuality and power is underscored by the fact that rape, and the fear of rape, are experienced by women, not just as domination.... The experience of rape as a sexual assault is inevitable in a culture where many forces converge to define women as essentially sexual beings.... [S]exuality, like power, is central to the experience of rape."<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, feminists informed by arguments that rape should be seen as an act of violence divorced from its sexual nature and approached legally as such, suggest that rape must be seen solely as an act of violent power. Yet, justifiably concerned about the inclination to excuse rape as the outcome of uncontrollable male sexual need, these feminists, such as Susan Brownmiller, argue at the same time that "we cannot work around the fact that in terms of human anatomy the possibility of forcible intercourse incontrovertibly exists."<sup>17</sup> Such contradiction merely exposes the multiple dimensions of sex and violence in the apprehension of rape.

And when the dimension of race is added these complexities compound. What do the complexities of rape suggest for women in the black community? To answer this question with any sense of understanding, one must acknowledge and consider the dual marks of oppression (race and sex) inscribed on the black female body. bell hooks, while acknowledging both sides of feminist perspectives concerning the parameters of rape as sexual and an act of power, emphasizes rape and black male violence within the context of the black family and as a consequence of Western privileging of aggressive authority. She argues from a black woman's perspective that "male violence in the family is an expression of male domination." More importantly she notes,

while male supremacy encourages the use of abusive force to maintain male domination of women, it is the Western philosophical notion of hierarchical

rule and coercive authority that is the root cause of violence against women, of adult violence against children, of all violence between those who dominate and those who are dominated."<sup>18</sup>

Echoing in her observations Fanon's perceptions that the results of insistence on aggressive authority are pathological, hooks points to any form of domination as a destructive force toward community.

It is significant then that black rape in *for colored girls* is not a violence of strangers using force to satisfy sexual need or to dominate a random victim in order to establish a sense of personal power. Sexual violence in Shange's poem takes on also the complication of familiarity, of occurring within a specific community. It becomes a symptom of the complexities and pathologies of power within the black community. Shange's rendition of rape in the home, by the neighbor or the friend, attempts to expose the question of black rape as an act of power, an act of sexual violence that is, most importantly, a violation of community stability. Shange implies what Fanon argues: the black male may have as the "goal of his behavior...The Other (in guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth. That is on the ethical level: self-esteem."<sup>19</sup> In other words, through sexual domination of the black woman, black men may in some way regain a sense of worth, temporarily tear control from the hands of white patriarchy, even as they are themselves "sufferin from latent racist bravado."<sup>20</sup>

What seems sexual domination here is for these men really a rehearsal of male authority, enforced by a system that ironically insists upon racial hierarchy and subsequent positions of authority/subordination within the same paradigm. Unlike the "stranger...wit obvious problems," the "latent rapists" in the poem are, to the speakers, acquaintances whom "you've been seen in public with.../ danced one dance/ or kissed...goodbye lightly wit closed mouth" or "who smile nice.../ lock the door behind you/ wit fist in face to fuck."<sup>21</sup> Feminist discourse on family violence is in this sense applicable. As Teresa de Lauretis observes, quoting Heines and Gordon, "[family] violence is the sign of 'a power struggle for the maintenance of a certain kind of social order'.... But which kind of social order is in question, to be maintained or to be dismantled, is just what is at stake in the discourse on family violence."<sup>22</sup>

In the black family, black male violence asserts a Western social order of dominance of the male, rehearsing by such an act the social parameters inscribed in Western ideologies of dominator/dominated. The irony here is that black men cannot sustain effectively the quest of black community to be a culturally, politically resistant body while affirming at the same time Western concepts of male aggressive authority. Here Shange in some ways dredges up and confronts, much as Kennedy does in her drama, the masculinist positioning of black revolutionary rhetoric. Shange's poem suggests that black male sexism and violence reverses the notion of a

productive, resistant black community. Such violence attempts to establish a position of authority over black women that, as the poem suggests in its conclusion, aligns them with the horrible act of rape perpetrated upon black female slaves by their white masters. In the penultimate stanza of the poem the speakers are "left with scars and betrayed by the men who know us." As the Lady in Red concludes:

cuz it turns out the nature of rape has  
changed....  
We cd even have em over for dinner  
& get raped in own houses  
by invitation  
a friend

This final stanza suggests also that rape in African-American women's experience has been historically misread as the result of her willingness as a partner in her own subjugation, in her cooperation with one of the most feared acts committed by the white master or overseer. Shange again in many ways mirrors Kennedy's fascination with rape as a trope of familial and communal destruction. Like Kennedy's Sarah and Clara, and even Sister Rat, Shange's speakers imply a misdirected guilt inherent in their positions as victimized black women.

Such positioning of the black woman is irrepressibly addressed in this sequence of Shange's play and can be contextualized historically. As early black women writers expressed in their writings, their sexual victimization was turned against them. Hazel Carby observes that it was in response to the necessity of gaining a sense of respect that



many nineteenth century black women writers first found

their voices:

black women, in gaining their public presence as writers, would directly confront the political and economic dimensions of their subjugation. They had to define a discourse of black womanhood which would not only address their exclusion from the ideology of the cult of true womanhood but, as a consequence of this exclusion, would also rescue their bodies from the persistent association with illicit sexuality.<sup>23</sup>

Black women were thus implicated in a dynamic that blamed the victim:

confronted by the black woman, the white man behaved in a manner that was considered to be entirely untempered by any virtuous qualities; the white male, in fact, was represented as being merely prey to the rampant sexuality of his female slaves.... [I]n the face of what was constructed as the overt sexuality of the black female, excluded as she was from the parameters of virtuous possibilities, these baser male instincts were entirely uncontrolled. Thus, the white slave master was not regarded as being responsible for his action toward his black female slaves.<sup>24</sup>

This misrepresentation of black women is significant in that Shange re-frames the same impulse to establish culpability and participation in the subjugation of black women by black men. Through friendships, invitations to dinner, and innocent closed-mouth kisses, black women are seen to participate in the act of their own sexual assault.

Although the "changing nature of rape" implicates black men in the oppression of black women and takes on the frightening dimension of now being acted out by men within their communities, Shange implies that even these events are tainted by black male perceptions of women that rehearse a

Western insistence on the complicity of women in their own sexual victimization. Woodhull observes that

women are punished...for presuming to circulate in public without men's protection, or for daring to articulate what it means for them to be in control of their bodies, in this case, by deciding where, when, with whom, and under what circumstances they will participate in the sexual act.<sup>25</sup>

Woodhull further insists on recognizing that "rape is used to justify the regulation of women's movement and, worse, that it is tolerated as a means to obstruct their circulation in public without men."<sup>26</sup> However, even this interpretation of restriction assumes the rights of choice for certain women and ignores the differing realities of movement for black women within the public domain.

In many cases, black women as workers within white homes and white businesses, forced by economics to move within such spaces, lack capabilities for deciding whether or not to circulate, and their social markings as black and female bodies establish double vulnerabilities for them in the presence of sexually violent white males. To further endure black male repetitions of such oppression within the supposed safety of black communities and of home seems an unbearable truth and a manifestation of the technologies of racism that Kennedy urgently addresses in her drama. With this in mind, it is clear that Shange's poem is an interrogation of the function of black rape/violence in the context of black male and female relationships in all of its pathological rehearsals of oppressive ideology and in its devastating effects upon the

comprehension and expression of safety, trust, and comfort in communities of black men and women.

The interruption of community through violence is the subject of another riveting scene in *for colored girls*. The Lady in Red again is engaged, this time in describing a physical confrontation between a father and his children, an observable conflict within black families that exposes an inescapable sense of frustration and disempowerment described by Frantz Fanon as "the black problem." According to Fanon, it is manifested in the black community as, again, combat breathing, an alienation and neurosis that results from racist bigotry and is evident when the "negro makes himself abnormal" in response to "the white man [who] is at once the perpetrator and the victim of a delusion" of black inferiority.<sup>27</sup>

The Lady in Red's narration of Beau Willie illustrates the devastating outcome of such anguish, of such rage. Beau Willie fought in the Vietnam war where he insists he was forced to "kill vietnamese children,"<sup>28</sup> Upon returning to the U.S., he recognizes, when he is refused veteran benefits for college, the failure of his efforts to earn respect from his home country as a soldier. His poor educational preparation and consequent illiteracy cause him to continually be placed in remedial classes. Resorting to a job as a gypsy cab driver, he is constantly harassed by the police and cannot make enough money to support himself and his girlfriend, Crystal, and their two children. The pressure of surviving and supporting his family has left Beau Willie crazed with anger and

frustration. For him "there waz no air,"<sup>29</sup> and he vents his hopelessness by physically abusing Crystal, almost killing her. Crystal, who "cldnt figure out what the hell he waz doin"<sup>30</sup> and who finally requested a court order refusing him access to her or his children, is horrified when Beau Willie breaks into her home one last time. This last act ensures the complete disintegration of the family, as Beau Willie

kicked the screen outta the window/ & held the kids  
offa the sill/ ...he looked from where the kids  
were hangin from the fifth story/ at all the people  
screamin at him/ & he started sweatin again/ say to  
alla the neighbors/ you gonna marry me/

The Lady in Red becomes Crystal in these last desperate moments of her narration:

I stood by beau in the window/ with naomi reachin  
for me/ & kwame screamin mommy mommy from the  
fifth story/ but I cd only whisper/ & he dropped em

Shange argues that the neurosis of characters like Beau Willie is exacerbated by an inability of black communities to find ways to vent their anguish at having to deal with "simply being alive & black & feeling in this strange deceitful country."<sup>31</sup> She acknowledges that this frustration arises out of the reality that

afro-american culture/ in attempts to carry on/ to  
move forward/ has minimized its 'emotional'  
vocabulary to the extent that admitting feelings of  
rage, defeat, frustration is virtually impossible  
outside a collective voice, so we can add self-  
inflicted repression to the cultural causes of our  
cultural disease of high blood pressure.<sup>32</sup>

Shange argues the necessity of individual voice beyond collective voice as a required remedy to the African-American individual's "minimized... 'emotional' vocabulary."

Attempts to radicalize this vocabulary occur in other moments of Shange's *for colored girls*.... In her "no more love poems" several individual voices combine to address the difficulties of survival if community is threatened. These poems examine the sense of loss for colored girls involved in romantic/sexual love of African-American relationships, complicated by the speakers' racialized, gendered-determined consciousnesses. Lady in Yellow laments

i shd be immune/ if i'm still alive & that's what i  
waz discussin/ how i am still alive & my dependency  
on other livin beins for love  
i survive on intimacy & tomorrow/ that's all i've  
got goin & the music waz like smack & you knew abt  
that & still refused my dance waz not enuf/ & it  
waz all i had but bein alive & bein a woman & bein  
colored is a metaphysical dilemma/ i haven't  
conquered yet/ do you see the point  
my spirit is too ancient to understand the  
separation of soul & gender/ my love is too  
delicate to have thrown  
back on my face <sup>33</sup>

The speaker here acknowledges her wish to be immune to the necessities of depending upon and communicating with other "livin beins" for love. This wish for immunity suggests that there is something hurtful in the communal need when it is precipitated through oppression, whether racial or gendered. Despite her wish, the speaker cannot be immune to communal need; interaction with the "you" of the poem is a must. Actually she admits it is as addictive as drugs. Shange here underscores the often painful nature of relationships, of

vulnerability, and acknowledges the danger of romanticizing their effects. As she points out, "our lives depend on our coming together. While we breathe, there can be no bows. There is no rest."<sup>34</sup>

Shange is also exploring the implications of an addictive need for love "like smack" among oppressed individuals are conveyed as well through the speaker's vision of herself as black, female, suffering from isolation. Such a personal state is still indicative of a more generalized problem, however, rich with implications in terms of community. As Fanon argues,

the neurotic structure of an individual is simply the elaboration, the formation, the eruption within the ego, of conflictual clusters arising in part out of the environment and in part out of the purely personal way in which that individual reacts to these influences.<sup>35</sup>

Although Fanon's theories of the individual and colonial domination are geared toward an occupied Algeria and make little reference to issues of women, his insistence on the individual's neurosis as unavoidably related to the environment, to the community, affirms the crucial importance of Shange's vision of individual health, of breaking the strictures of a collective, "self-inflicted repression" in order to ameliorate communal health. Shange relies upon the character's own private "metaphysical dilemma" where the individual must grapple with her own obsessive desires and respond to them with a sense of personal responsibility within the parameters of community, since there "are no cures for our 'condition' save those we afford ourselves."<sup>36</sup>

Lady in Orange explores a similar moment:

i brought you what joy i found & i found joy/  
 honest fingers round my face/  
 ...you put my heart in the bottom of yr shoe/...so  
 this is not a love poem/...cuz i had convinced  
 myself colored girls had no right to sorrow/ & i  
 lived & loved that way & kept sorrow on the curb/  
 allegedly  
 for you/ but i know i did it for myself/  
 ...i cdnt stand bein sorry & colored at the same  
 time it's so redundant in the modern world<sup>37</sup>

Both speakers see their "modern world" dilemmas as nearly impossible to conquer because these conflicts are not compatible with an ancient spirit of understanding that would not see soul, gender and race perceived and accepted through the prism of "separation." Shange refers here to an "ancient" spirit, an allusion to African emphasis of linking individuals within a community historically. Although her plays engage the contradictions and difficulties inherent in communal interaction, Shange seems at the same time to suggest that a certain wholeness of the individual may be achieved via an awareness of and participation in community.

In the poem "pyramid," Shange first addresses this formation of healing community. Three women respond to a divisive love for the same man who "bided his time" and "tried" each of the friends. Ultimately, the three women, "like a pyramid," find strength in a friendship that outlasts the jaded love offered to them by this one man:

her friend cdnt speak or cry  
 they hugged & went to where he waz  
 wit another woman  
 he said good-bye to one  
 tol the other he would call

she held her head on her lap  
 the lap of her sisters soakin up tears  
 each understandin how much love stood between them  
 how much love between them  
 love like sisters<sup>38</sup>

Although Shange portrays the importance of black men in the lives of these women, a female community is their ultimate refuge from the manner in which black men have violated the order of the black community through sexual and domestic violence, through infidelity, through personal weakness. In the play, the final solution to these violations is to defy the anguish of loneliness, silence, and the temptation of suicide and to celebrate the creation of a new vocal community of women, formulated in defiance of the difficulties of oppression, and emphasizing an absence of men. As Lady in Red concludes,

i sat up one nite walkin a boardin house  
 screamin/ cryin/ the ghost of another woman  
 who waz missin what i waz missin  
 i wanted to jump outta my bones  
 & be done wit myself  
 leave me alone  
 & go on in the wind  
 it waz too much  
 i fell into a numbness  
 til the only tree I could see  
 took me up in her branches...

i found god in myself  
 & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely

As the play ends, all of the speakers take up the Lady in Red's last two statements. According to Shange's stage directions; they "repeat to themselves softly the lines.... It soon becomes a song of joy.... After the song peaks the ladies enter into a closed tight circle" forming finally a community



of women that through its collective strength can offer to "colored girls who have considered suicide/" a way of surviving by "movin to the ends of their own rainbows."<sup>39</sup> Thus Shange suggests one type of healing community as a form of personal and cultural resistance and preservation.

This optimistic conclusion is both an extension of Adrienne Kennedy's interrogation of family/community and an interruption of the open-ended difficulties of family/community that terminate Kennedy's works. Where Kennedy prescribes fatal, confused, ambiguous suffering and death as the outcome of her character's anguish, still managing to impart a certain dignity to that anguish, Shange offers straightforward possibilities toward a dignity, as well as an improved social condition for her characters, directing them toward communal moments of strength and inspiration. Such a difference suggests that Kennedy's earlier works were still much embroiled in the recognition and exposition of the complexities of American racial oppressions, particularly for women, and less capable of providing clear solutions to them. This difference might also suggest that Kennedy was less enthusiastic and optimistic than Shange seems to be in for *colored girls*... about the healing possibilities that could be derived from the efforts of a community still firmly encased within a white racist superstructure. Shange in her optimistic resolution to her play in some ways undermines the more vital and convincing struggles of her characters that are expressed within the framework of combat breathing and alienation. The

rainbow image as the final metaphor in some ways suggests an almost romanticized less than convincing faith in sisterhood and communal unity.

An examination of collective voice and communal interaction is also illustrated in Shange's *spell #7: geechee jibara quik magic trance manual for technologically stressed third world people* (1979). The title itself suggests the necessity of recognizing the colonized status of African-Americans and rehearses the postcolonial as one stance of Shange's dramatic theory. The play examines in the microcosm of a black bar the pangs of anguish that occur among black communities: a "family" of women, men, actors; a "company [who] have worked & played together for a long time," and who by extrapolation could represent an American located 'third world people.'<sup>40</sup> Through an exploration of the struggles of the African-American theater artist, Shange's second play seems more in line with Kennedy's cynicism; it plumbs a multi-leveled community dynamic while emphasizing that community's isolated position within the larger confines of American racism.

The more complex representations of women in this play seem to privilege the issues of women, but this occurs only within the larger realm of the whole group and emphasizes the women's interaction with the men. The separation and reintegration of the male and female groups presents a choreography of communities that weaves in and out of the necessities demanded by each. Shange seems to move here toward

a position of cultural resistance against oppression that must include the whole community, not just insular, internal communities working toward specific needs, as the community of women at the end of *for colored girls*... so strongly suggests. Shange locates in *spell #7* the nexus of cultural and political resistance as squarely within the community, emphasizing a search for strength through unity. To engage the complexities of engendering such unity, meaning is constructed in this play via actors who debut in blackface and who act out actors acting, creating a multiple dynamic of reflexivity that reflects much of the dilemma of black communities in white America.

Where Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* uses whiteface as a reversed and reversing analysis of the racist and sexist implications of white blackface traditions, Shange also probes the possibilities of the minstrel tradition, interrogating communal resistance to white racism through the metonymy of blackface minstrelsy. Unlike Kennedy, however, Shange confronts directly, in addition to symbolically, the immediate performance level of her drama by underscoring the role of actors within the play. For Shange the mask is a device both representative of and complicated by the reflexive positioning of actual actors who in turn portray characters as actors portraying characters.

Still, like the role of minstrelsy in Kennedy's *Funnyhouse*, the haunting image of the exaggerated minstrel mask is unavoidable. In Shange's *spell #7*, the presence of a

huge minstrel mask causes the play to begin before its beginning, in order to communicate to the audience the cultural reflexivity of theater, as in, for example, the impact of historical theater on the contemporary theatrical moment, paralleling the impact of racism upon the contemporary black community. According to Shange's stage directions, a great blackface minstrel mask hangs openly

from the ceiling of the theater as the audience enters. in a way the show has already begun, for the members of the audience must integrate this grotesque, larger than life misrepresentation of life into their pre-show chatter, slowly the house lights fade, but the mask looms even larger in the darkness.<sup>41</sup>

Each character entering the stage is a black actor in blackface. Shange here invokes the complexities of blackface ideology.

As mentioned earlier, the consummation of blackface in the pastiche of black minstrels leaves a confused trail of meaning. While resurrecting the negative stereotypical positioning of black character iterated by each white blackface performance, blacks in blackface at the same moment can subvert this positioning through a concomitant emphatic self-representation. In the same fashion, actors acting as actors acting conflate the apprehension of that self-representation. Thus the portrayal in *spell #7* of the character/actors in and out of blackface and their renditions of certain black experiences constructs an examination of the levels of realities within the black community and reiterates through that exposure the need to understand and address black

communal struggle. Unlike Kennedy's reversal of blacks in blackface via her black figures in white face--which is most concerned with betraying the materiality of whiteness in the identity of her mixed raced characters and thus problematizing the state of the interstitial--Shange's dynamics of reflexivity, inscribed in both kinds of mirroring moments of blackface minstrelsy and multiple representations of actors, work as a kind of exegesis of the layered textures of black communal relations, an exegesis whose purpose is to develop a communal self-understanding and self-love.

In response to the intricacies of portraying African-American community, Lou as the black, blackface magician is given the ability to direct and shift realities in the play. He establishes his motivation immediately:

my daddy retired from magic & took  
up another trade cuz this friend of mine  
from the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade/ asked to be made white  
on the spot

what cd any self-respectin colored american  
magician  
do wit such an outlandish request/cept  
put all them razzamatazz hocus pocus zippity-doo-  
dah  
thingamajigs away cuz  
colored chirren believin in magic  
waz becomin politically dangerous for the race<sup>42</sup>

The play becomes black magic ritual; its magician is Lou:

cuz i been studyin up on my daddy's technique  
& everything i do is magic these days  
& it's very colored/ very now you see it/now you  
don't mess wit me<sup>43</sup>

Lou also quickly establishes the purpose of the spell:

this is blk magic  
you lookin at

& I'm fixin you up good/ fixin you up good &  
 colored  
 you gonna be colored all yr life  
 & you gonna love it/ bein colored/ all yr life/  
 colored & love it<sup>44</sup>

The characters peel off their outer layers of minstrelsy by removing their masks and become images of freed expression within a new reality of actors interacting socially. As her stage directions suggest, Shange, while revealing that identity itself is performative as Judith Butler argues, fosters early in the play an expectation that these characters will effectively and comfortably reveal themselves from beneath those blackface masks:

"here they are free to be themselves, to reveal secrets, fantasies, nightmares, or hope. It is safe because it is segregated & magic reigns."<sup>45</sup>

And the characters do find themselves in a safe place, a bar owned and inhabited by blacks only, a place where communication and self-revelation can occur unhindered by the white gaze.

Within this "safe haven" we find Eli, the bartender and owner, reveling in a localized sense of power:

you are welcome  
 to my kingdom my city my self  
 but yr presence must not disturb these inhabitants  
 leave nothing out of place/ push no dust under my  
 rugs  
 leave not a crack in my wine glasses  
 no finger prints  
 clean up after yrself in the bathroom  
 there are no maids here no days off  
 for healing no insurance policies  
 for dislocation of the psyche...  
 I sustain no intrusions/ no double-entendre romance  
 no soliciting of sadness in my life  
 are those who love me well  
 the rest are denied their visas<sup>46</sup>

Eli's expression of community as "my self" articulates how within this place each character can through unfettered action explore his/her place and role in the community and, through this exploration, develop an understanding of self.

And the characters as actors themselves do take on and off many roles as their interaction proceeds, roles that seem to attempt a representation of a number of difficult issues within the black community. For example, the male characters move in and out of personae that interrogate various male locations within the black community, particularly as they relate to black women. In looking at these characters who as actors assume roles, one cannot ignore the fluidity that their shifts in portrayals render.

Images of control, of invested power, of self-centered artists as sexual players who manipulate and use women, dominate the characterization of the male figures in the play. For example, Ross, Alec, and Lou narrate into being a number of female characterizations assumed and performed by female characters as actors in the bar. In a sense they define the reality of these female representations through their words and their perspectives. Ross narrates the experiences of a worn out mother, Fay, who is looking for a good time where no one wants or respects her presence; Alec describes the anguishing moments in the life of a young black woman, Sue-jean, driven by loneliness to insanity so much that she murders her own child and keeps his body in his crib, so as not to ever lose him.

All the men engage enthusiastically in an ironic depiction of the difficulties of young black women in establishing honest relationships with black men, insisting on the frequency and primacy of male interest in female desirability. The men emphasize their refrain, "aw babee/ you so pretty," which once said, they all agree, determines for any woman that "it's all over."<sup>47</sup> The black woman objectified here is further denigrated by her relegation to second class status in relation to white women, for as Lou observes,

the whole world knows/ european & non-european  
alike/...that nobody loves the black woman like  
they love farrah fawcett-majors. the whole world  
dont turn out for a dead black woman like they did  
for marilyn monroe."<sup>48</sup>

Through these portrayals and dialogue with the women, the men also raise issues of recognizing the complicity of all whites in a racist America and the necessity of black magic, as is characterized in spell #7, in coping with the consequent realities of this complicity.

The female characters in the bar, through their participation in the portrayals of female figures as well as in their moments as themselves, are dually fictionalized and raise the question of identity for black women. They, like the men, participate in exposing issues of sexual attractiveness and the objectification of black women, centering on women who sacrifice their careers for their men, and the horror of female insanity.

In addition, they create female characterizations of their own. Lily and Bettina perform a poem and dance scene in



which hair is a multiple metaphor for unconscious desire,  
 inevitably tied to Western concepts of female beauty and  
 material success that are symbolized by European folk figures.  
 As Lily declares,

i'm gonna simply brush my hair. Rapunzel pull yr  
 tresses back into the tower. & lady godiva give up  
 horseback riding. i'm gonna alter my social &  
 professional life dramatically.... mostly i brush  
 and brush. i may lose contact with my friends. i cd  
 lose my job/ but i'm on unemployment & brush while  
 waiting in line for my check.... i'ma brush. i  
 brush my hair while thinking about anything. mostly  
 i think about how it will be when I get my full  
 heada hair. like lifting my head in the morning  
 will become a chore. i'll try to turn my cheek & my  
 hair will weigh me down<sup>49</sup>

Even as her hair brushing might bring some difficulty to her  
 life, ultimately the amount and beauty of her hair is  
 anticipated to produce flamboyant powers that incorporate non-  
 European treasures with Eurocentric views of wealth and  
 beauty:

i'll find ambrosia. my hair'll grow pomegranats &  
 soil/ rich as round the aswan/i wake in my bed to  
 bananas/ avocados/ collard greens.... with bricks  
 that plop from where a 9-year-old's top braid wd  
 be/ i will brush myself a house with running water  
 & a bidet. i'll have a closet full of clean bed  
 linen & and the lil girl from the castro  
 convertible commercial will come & open the bed  
 repeatedly & stay on as a helper to brush my  
 hair.<sup>50</sup>

The hair metaphor, in some ways reminiscent of Kennedy's  
 images of blackness, smooth white tables and oriental rugs in  
 Funnyhouse, is mixed, connected with elements of third world  
 bounty and beauty, images of contrasting black American hair

traditions, while at the same time affiliated with material prosperity and the pleasures of domestic servants.

This complicating representation of the hair metaphor rehearses the question of hair within the African-American community as a complex dynamic precisely because of emphasis on the ideological value of hair in terms of Western determined requisites for female beauty and social acceptance. As suggested in *The Color Complex*, in the black community,

the politics of hair parallels the politics of skin color. Among Black women, straight hair and European hairstyles not only have been considered more feminine but have sent a message about one's standing in the social hierarchy. "Good hair" has long been associated with the light-skinned middle class, "bad hair" with Blacks who are less fortunate.<sup>51</sup>

Lily's hyperbolic description of quantities and qualities of hair needed for acceptance and satisfaction challenges intra-racial appropriation of Western demarcations of the black body, demarcations manichean in nature and, again, indicative of Shange's interest in the postcolonial implications of African-American experience. The insistent emphasis in pop culture, in literature, and in social experience on white beauty signified by long straight hair and thin bodies as opposed to a generalized unattractiveness of black female physicality reiterates assumptions reminiscent of colonial cultural discourse. As Abdul JanMohamed observes,

the dominant model of power--and interest--relations in all colonial societies is the manichean opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native.... This axis in turn provides the central feature of the colonialist

cognitive framework and colonialist literary representation: the manichean allegory--a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object.<sup>52</sup>

Shange attempts to confine these allegories specifically within the parameters of African-American female consciousness and takes the occasion through the metaphor of hair to privilege black cultural resistance to oppressive ideological representations of black physicality. And where Kennedy undermines the ideological binaries of dominant culture, Shange attempts to reverse them. Lily's appropriation and re-interpretation of the hair metaphor is an attempt to resist, by reversing its implications, that Western ideology which defines an oppressive intent prescribed in physical criteria, particularly in its positioning of black female bodies.

But perhaps the most powerful moment in Shange's *spell #7* in terms of black female resistance is Natalie's "i'm gonna be a white girl" monologue. Here Shange produces a riveting analysis of the image of white women in the black female mind. Such an analysis is significant in that it re-situates the positioning of white females in Western male and female hierarchies of power within the regard of African-American women, while at the same time characterizing the insecurities, assumptions, and sympathies that formulate the self-perceptions of those black women.

For Natalie the consciousness of a white girl is of utmost interest:

today i'm gonna be a white girl/ i'll  
 retroactively wake myself up/ ah low & behold/ a  
 white girl in my bed/ but first i'll haveta call a  
 white girl i know to have some more accurate  
 information/ what's the first thing white girls  
 think in the morning/ do they get up being glad  
 they aint niggahs/ do they remember mama/ or worry  
 abt gettin to work/ do they work?/ do they play  
 isadora & wrap themselves in sheets & go tip toeing  
 to the kitchen to make maxwell house coffee/ oh i  
 know/ the first thing a white girl does in the  
 morning is fling her hair/<sup>53</sup>

In addition to the inescapable reference to hair, this sequence positions the bourgeois awareness of Natalie as well as the bourgeois class of her object of scrutiny and reveals a major perception of economic as well as physical competition that haunts middle class African-American women. Through this nuance, Shange challenges monolithic notions of black female identity, contrasting her speaker with quotidian stereotypical images of the poverty-ridden, licentious, ignorant black girls.

The speaker also rehearses in the poem patriarchal and racial stereotypes while at the same time interrogating white women's involvement in the oppression of women of color, even if that oppressive stance reaffirms the white woman's own subjugation. Natalie emphasizes the extent to which such involvement can actually cross class:

i'm gonna water my plants/ but am i a po white  
 trash girl with a old jellyjar/ or am i a  
 sophisticated & protestant  
 suburbanite with 2 valiums slugged awready &  
 a porcelain water carrier leading me up the  
 stairs.../ in williams arizona as a white girl/ i  
 cd push the navaho women outta my way in the  
 supermarket & push my nose in the air so i wdnt  
 haveta smell them. coming from bay ridge on the  
 train i cd smile at all the black & puerto rican

people/ & hope they cant tell i want them to go  
back where they came from/ or at least be  
invisible<sup>54</sup>

While revealing her own prejudices and assumptions in these descriptions, the black woman speaker at the same time examines with courageous honesty the prejudices of white women inscribed in their own experiences of sexual subjugation and re-inscribed in their use of such subjugation as excuse for their own weaknesses:

i cd say with my eyes wide open/ totally sincere/  
oh i didnt know that/ i cd say i didnt know/ i  
cant/ i dont know how/ cuz i'ma a white girl & i  
dont have to do much of anything.

all of this is the fault of the white man's  
sexism/ oh how I loathe tight-assed thin-lipped  
pink white men/ even the football players lack a  
certain relaxed virility. that's why my heroes are  
either just like my father who while he still cdnt  
speak english knew enough to tell me how the  
niggers shd go back to where they came from...<sup>55</sup>

The formulation of the dominated here helps to construct and underwrite the privileged position of the dominator. Natalie as the white girl, while exploring the complicity of white women in the domination of black women, concludes that "it's this kinda pressure that forces us white girls to be so absolutely pathological abt other women in the world/"<sup>56</sup>

Natalie in her representation also expresses revealing moments of envy, fear and sympathy of black women looking to the complexities of white female cultural location. Natalie acknowledges that the place for white women in a patriarchal, materialistic, hierarchical domain leaves her little room for maneuvering. Even those white women who may experience empathy with the oppressed are rendered suspect: "all the white women

of the world dont wake up being glad they aint niggahs/  
only some of them." Yet even more racially liberal white women  
still face a culturally divided reality. They must

wake up thinking how can i survive another day of  
this culturally condoned incompetence. i know i'll  
play tenor horn & tell all colored artists i meet/  
that now i'm just like them/ i'm colored i'll say  
cuz i have a struggle too. Or i cd punish this  
white beleaguered body of mine with advances of a  
thousand ebony bodies/...cuz i'm sorry/ yes i'm so  
sorry they were born niggahs. but then if i cant  
punish myself to death for being white/ i certainly  
cant in good conscience keep waiting for the  
cleaning lady/ like if i do anything at all i'm  
extending myself as a white girl/ cuz part of being  
a white girl is being absent/ <sup>57</sup>

Ironically, the speaker who begins her monologue certain  
that there must be advantages to "retroactively wake myself  
up...a white girl in my bed" comes to the conclusion that  
"what with having to take 20 valiums a day/ to consider the  
ERA/ & all the men in the world/ & my ignorance of the world/  
it is overwhelming. I'm so glad I'm colored."<sup>58</sup> Natalie's  
statement that she "loves bein colored" approaches the intent  
with which Lou as the magician has been working in *spell #7*,  
his purpose of "fixin you up good and colored/" to "love it/  
bein colored"<sup>59</sup> And at the very end of the play just as all  
characters chant in 'serious celebration, like church/ like  
home" the refrain "colored & love it," Lou with his magic  
causes them to freeze. This is his moment to crystallize the  
power of black pride, self-love, and collective resistance. He  
exclaims,

crackers are born with the right to be  
alive/ I'm making ours up right here  
in yr face/ & we gonna be

colored & love it<sup>60</sup>

At this moment of triumph, according to the stage directions "the huge minstrel mask comes down as the company continues to sing 'colored & love it...' blackout/ but the minstrel mask remains visible."<sup>61</sup> The power and purpose of this exegesis of the textured layers of black communal relations is thus both finally accomplished and challenged. When the huge masks looms once more over the actors, it ironically reminds them and the audience, and here Shange echoes Kennedy's own admonitions, that their efforts are not devoid of a certain amount of futility. They are efforts articulated within an awareness of the gross realities of an ongoing, vital racial oppressive reality that is not easily or even conceivably changeable.

Where Kennedy insists on the ineluctable presence of racist and sexist oppression in her continued inclusion of white face characters throughout *Funnyhouse*, *spell #7* must be examined in terms of the framework of the magic minstrel show that Shange builds around it. The magical mask and Lou the magician exhibit qualities that foreshadow the power of the spiritual in the coping skills of the black community and at the same time operate as a smoke-screen against the bankruptcy of their sense of security within a racist socio-economic system.

Still, Shange is clearly paralleling Kennedy in her recognition of the implications of minstrelsy as a Janus-faced referent for American racism. Commenting on *spell #7*, Shange

interprets the minstrel metaphor as representative of  
unavoidable truths in black lives,

& after all that/ our true visions & rigors laid  
bare/ down from the ceiling comes the huge minstrel  
face/ laughing at all of us for having been so  
game/ we believed we cd escape his powers/ how  
naïve cd we be/<sup>62</sup>

Although Shange claims in "A Celebration of Black Survival" that "we make minstrelsy our own, even wearing red velvet, but no burnt cork. Our dance reflects the many ways we've avoided death, insisted on living," *spell* #7 exposes the dangers inherent in adopting and adapting that which oppresses us.<sup>63</sup>

Ultimately, for Shange the minstrel mask seems to have the last laugh. The temporary abatement of "the involuntary constrictions n amputations of their humanity," through a retreat into the safety of community can not ultimately free those who frequent Eli's bar.<sup>64</sup> The minstrel mask translates their truth for them. Living within a white racist society is in effect their final, inescapable reality. As Shange ultimately claims, the minstrel metaphor and what it represents in American society is unavoidably real, "the minstrel may be banned as racist/ but the minstrel is more powerful in his deformities than our alleged rejection of him/."<sup>65</sup>

And yet we cannot say that something of value has not taken place within the community of the bar. A growth of understanding, of self-discovery, of communal effort at coping all seem to make the characters more capable of surviving a system from which there is no escape. Self discovery is of



particular import here. Fanon's analysis of the dominated's identity within colonialist frameworks seems to inform Shange's play, particularly those sequences that develop through individual experience as in the case of Natalie's monologue.

Although working from within masculinist language, Fanon makes a point still powerfully applicable to the mask and to the characters in Eli's bar. For colonized blacks,

moral consciousness implies a kind of scission, a fracture of consciousness into a bright part and an opposing black part. In order to achieve morality, it is essential that the black, the dark, the Negro vanish from consciousness. Hence a Negro is forever in combat with his own image.<sup>66</sup>

Resolution to this scission can only come to one who has "freed himself of this guilt, or who in any case has managed not to submit to it."<sup>67</sup> Moments of self recognition and growth among those of the community within the safety of the bar represent a stretch toward necessary growth to break free of self oppression instilled by the internalization of racist notions of inferiority. As Fanon concludes, "in order to win certainty of oneself, the incorporation of the concept of recognition is essential."<sup>68</sup> Shange seems intent upon exploring the possibilities of such self-discovery in her play, acknowledging, however, that some form of salvation must go beyond pure individualism. She insists that in the presence of the unavoidable minstrel mask of racial oppression, the most powerful force of redemption must come from all members of the

black community, from communities within that community in spite of internal differences.

Shange's concept of community is not without complication, however. She does not suggest that black communities, and black artists, for example, are "sequestered in the monolith."<sup>69</sup> While as an artist, Shange feels the beckoning of her art to "fit the needs of my century or my people," she at the same time calls for an individuality of voice within the collective.<sup>70</sup> For her too often black readers "have not demanded singularity from our writers," and have claimed a certain "collaboration with any blk writer." Readers thus "expect a poet to clear a space/ not her space/ not a secret/ not a close room/ but the town/;" they assume "the poet to be the voice of everywhere we are not/ as opposed to bein' everything we are...."<sup>71</sup> At its worst, such perception of black writers "wd mean there is absolutely no acceptance of blk personal reality."<sup>72</sup> Shange declares that "until we believe in the singularity of our persons/ our spaces, language & therefore craft, will not be nurtured consciously/ our writers will come across it/ if they want. But we wont recognize it/."<sup>73</sup> Specific voice must be privileged through a recognition of its own power. Shange emphatically describes the significance of specific voice:

we think the poet is speakin for the world/ there's something wrong there, a writer's first commitment is to the piece itself. how the words fall & leap/ or if they dawdle & sit down fannin themselves. writers are dealing with language, not politics. that comes later. so much later.... when i take my voice into a poem or a story/ i am trying

desperately to give you that/ i am not trying to  
 give you a history of my family/ the struggle of  
 black people all over the world or the fight goin  
 on upstairs tween susie & matt/ i am giving you a  
 moment/ like something that isnt coming back/ a  
 something particularly itself....<sup>74</sup>

Yet she acknowledges the inscription of community within this specificity.

our language shd let you know who's talkin, what  
 we're talkin abt & how we cant stop sayin this to  
 you. some urgency accompany the text.... we are  
 speakin. reachin out for yr person/ if you  
 listen...you cd imagine us like music & make us  
 yrs.<sup>75</sup>

An almost contrapuntal insistence on the specificity of art  
 toward a collective voice, this then is the value of community  
 in another of its most powerful forms for Shange.

#### Felt Architecture

An avenue toward the development of collective voice  
 develops out of the formal innovations and developments in  
 Shange's drama. Her work both asks the question of form and  
 proposes an answer. For Shange, new dramatic form and language  
 are the vehicles of a new communal voice representing the  
 individual and the collective. Shange urges the development of  
 a new form of drama which must attempt to capture and  
 emphasize "the freedom to move in space, to demand of my own  
 sweat a perfection that could continually be approached,  
 though never known" and couple it with her "voice as a woman  
 and a poet" to produce a "single statement, a choreopoem."<sup>76</sup>  
 The choreopoem, conceived as a series of poems and brought  
 together in a sensuous visual and verbal collage, works toward  
 final impressionistic, chimerical effect, avoiding linear

development or plot coherence. In *for colored girls...*, there is an emphasis on identity through color; the characters are designated as the ladies in brown, yellow, purple, red, green, blue and orange. Color, rather than bemoaned and despised as a mark of racial suffering or deprivation, here is a celebration of collective expression. The rainbow is perceived with all colors distinctly visible yet inextricably juxtaposed to form the whole. This rainbow in Shange's metaphorical universe is a place of hope where ladies designated by color and having considered personal and perhaps racial suicide find hope in the joining of their colors to create a sisterhood. This fusion of color is underwritten by the fusion of one poetic sequence into another.

In addition Shange, plants her first seeds of certain other formal innovations. She introduces a direct emphasis on music, rhythmic chant, dance, and a modified call-response delivery. Such formal innovation affords Shange the opportunity to capture complexities of African-American experience and present her characters and themes strongly from the perspective of space, time, movement. Emphasis here is again on the African artistic imagination grounded in dance, song, and rhythm. Shange privileges these as devices of dramatic expression perhaps in part as answer to the historical misgivings of early black dramatic theorists about such dramatic form.

Early in the larger black community there was an apprehension that emphasis on music, dance, or even honest

presentations of complex characters in black plays could and probably would undermine the development of black drama by reiterating the racist stereotypes of musicals and minstrel shows. The black audience, for example, seemed to overcompensate in its tastes in drama for subject matter that would uplift the race in response to the derision of African-Americans commonly found on the contemporary stage. As critic and playwright Willis Richardson observed in 1925:

the average Negro audience seldom goes to the theatre to hear a Negro play with an open mind. They seem to think that the Negro character should be portrayed as an angel.

He continues,

these average audiences do not generally like dialect, they do not like unpleasant characters and endings, and the most important thing of all, they forget, if they ever knew, that the main business of the drama is the portrayal of human characters.<sup>77</sup>

Despite this unease within the community, there was at the same time an insistence among many playwrights and theorists that music, dance and realistic characters were valid aspects of black culture and still could be included in drama in ways that might work toward undermining if not erasing the ugly legacy of minstrelsy.<sup>78</sup> Gregory's solution to what he saw as the egregious position of black theatre of his period was to call for a "national Negro Theater where Negro playwright, musician, actor, dancer, and artist in concert shall fashion a drama that will merit the respect and admiration of America."<sup>79</sup>

Shange aggressively elaborates upon the latter theory of drama in her own dramatic manifesto aimed at expression of cultural resistance toward racist and sexist oppression. Again she indicates an inspiration from her interest in and emphasis on the work of Frantz Fanon in her attempts to move away from European concepts of art. In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon's answer to the devastation of colonialism, to the havoc it wreaked upon colonized communities, was to avoid imitation of the colonizer's rubric in order to effect progress for humanity. He argues,

we today can do everything, so long as we do not imitate Europe, so long as we are not obsessed by the desire to catch up with Europe.... The human condition, plans for mankind, and collaboration between men in those tasks which increase the sum total of humanity are new problems, which demand true inventions. Let us decide not to imitate Europe; let us combine our muscles and our brains in a new direction.<sup>80</sup>

In a similar spirit, and echoing Kennedy's concern for the expression of African-American experience in its multiplicity of spaces, Shange asserts her own interest in testing the limits of traditional drama as a way of expressing black experience. Arguing that rather than "trying to make our primary statements with somebody else's life/ somebody else's idea of what theater is," African-American playwrights "must move our theatre into our own lives."<sup>81</sup> As if in response to Kennedy's burgeoning radical aesthetic that insists on African-inspired ritual movement, rhythms, chants, litanies and a miniaml use of music, Shange's answer to the quest for a

distinctly African-American dramatic expression is direct  
and emphatic:

I suggest that: we demolish the notion of straight theater for a decade or so, refuse to allow playwrights to work without dancers & musicians. 'coon shows' were somebody else's idea. we have integrated the notion that a drama must be words/ with no music & no dance/ cuz that wd take away the seriousness of the event/ cuz we all remember too well/ the chuckles and scoffs at the notion that all niggers cd sing & dance/ most of us can sing and dance/ & the reason so many plays written to silence & stasis fail/ is cuz most black peoples have some music & movement in our lives. we do sing & dance. this a cultural reality. that is why I find the most inspiring theater among us to be in the realms of music & dance.<sup>82</sup>

Shange continues that since African-Americans "are an interdisciplinary culture/ ...we understand more than verbal communication," such a complexity of experience demands much of the African-American literary artist. This complexity "lays a weight on afro-american writers that few others are lucky enough to have been born into."<sup>83</sup> Emphasizing the unwieldy burden and unusual legacy of the black artist, she continues,

we are drawn for a number of reasons/ to the life and times of black people who conquered their environments/ or at least their pain with their art, & if these people are mostly musicians & singers & dancers/ then what is a writer to do to draw the most human & revealing moments from lives spent in nonverbal activity... If Fats Waller & Eubie Blake & Charlie Parker & Savilla Fort & Katherine Dunham moved the world outta their way/ how did they do it/ certainly not by mimicking the weakest area in american art/ the american theater/<sup>84</sup>

Shange seems convinced that for black writers to accomplish their artistic responsibility, they must pursue three goals that fly in the face of some traditional visions of black

drama: include all the physical senses in the development of works, be committed to writing the world as the artist remembers it, and include and encourage dancers, singers, musicians, and writers to transgress the boundaries of their skills and "do more than 1 thing." Such an awareness of layers of creation culminates for Shange in a "felt architecture" that best expresses the collective voice of the people.<sup>85</sup>

Shange demonstrates this radical form in *for colored girls*.... As her first rendition of the choreopoem, this play blends rhythmic movement and juxtaposed poetic sequences as its underlying structure with a postmodernist insistence on an avoidance of linearity or rigid character development which enhances this unique offering of form. The Ladies move easily in and out of various poetic representations of character, often incorporating dance into their expression of emotion and thought. In several instances the Ladies interact within sequences creating a tempered introduction to Shange's interest in call-response. For example, in the "my love is" sequence all seven speakers participate in a responsive development of refrain. Lady in Yellow begins,

my love is too delicate  
to have thrown back in my face

Each Lady responds signifying on the original statement.

lady in brown	my love is too beautiful
	to have thrown back in my face
lady in purple	my love is too sanctified
	to have thrown back on my face
lady in blue	my love is saturday
	to have thrown back on my face
lady in red	my love is too complicated
	to have thrown back on my face



lady in green	my love is too music
	to have thrown back on my face
everyone	music
	music

Shange's introduction of call-response in *for colored girls*... seems an attempt again to look for form which best expresses African-American communal experience. And her insistence on music as the central metaphor here for representing communal moments can not be underestimated. Through these examples she injects African traditional artistic forms into American drama.

In *spell #7* Shange also engages possibilities of form. Challenging traditional expectations of coherence and unity, she invokes shifts in characterizations emphatically, requiring actors portraying actors to slide in and out of identities at will. In addition, within the first fifteen pages of the play, the characters participate in at least five scene changes. These precipitate different moments of interaction among the men and women. Contrary to linear plot or a fixed logical chronology, there are in the whole of the play over twenty character transitions instrumental in the slow exposure of the community. These result in an emphasis on fluidity in the community, of articulation among characters and a troubling revelation of the instability of identity for the characters even within this "safe" environment. Shange also develops the presence of music more directly in this piece where characters sing popular tunes to indicate the mood of their shifting interactions and correspond with

interpretive dance movements. The frequent voice of a juke box and the added voices of characters crooning songs like "Ooh Baby, Baby" establish music as a presence for commentary on the action.

Also by incorporating a "black magic" setting where minstrelsy and an ironic self consciousness informs dramatic characterization, Shange adds dimension to the dramatic fusion of scenes and emotive illustrations. This addition mirrors layers of form with layers of meaning. And an intense awareness of the looming element of theatrical history represented by the huge minstrel mask also allows for a mysterious contextualization of Shange's dramatic experimentations in the play. Because the mask begins and ends the play, Shange produces a sense of unavoidable circularity to the problem of racist oppression for the African-American. The characters end where they begin, no matter how powerful their internal analyses have been. Again the structure of *spell #7* seems to reiterate the play's reach for meaning.

Perhaps of Shange's pieces the most interesting experiment in form as an interrogation of black female identity is *boogie woogie landscapes*(1979). The "felt architecture" of this work exhibits an uncanny similarity to Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, as an anatomy of a young girl's (Layla's) psychology, delivered through a number of night-life companions ("n.l.c.'s") who are in effect her "dream-memories."<sup>86</sup> These n.l.c.'s enter Layla's night world to evoke memories that force her to address her present, and thus

take her through a series of flashbacks and meditations that explore the difficulties of black female existence.

For example, through cooperative narrative, the n.l.c.'s produce interactive sequences depicting the agonies of Layla as a lonely fourteen year old black girl experiencing puberty. She is "trapped in black and white," both literally and figuratively, where the black/white binary allows no alternative spaces of existence. A "chiaroscuro of her life," the binary confines her to "a deeper gray than the shutters of her house." Layla yearns for the option of other colors; "she howls for anything red..." or any other color that will offer her ways of interpreting life that might bring stimulation to her life. The n.l.c.'s describe her:

she never thought people places or ideas were  
anything  
but black & white...

she is trapped in black and white/ without shadows  
she cannot lean against anything/  
the earth has no depth because she cannot hold it  
she cannot go away/<sup>87</sup>

In her most direct use of call-response, Shange has Layla respond directly to the call of her dream-memories. Layla does this first through denial, conjuring up a refrain that distances her from her memories and aids her in an attempt to escape her realities, suggesting, perhaps, even suicide:

dontcha wanna be music & ease into the fog?  
Dontcha wanna be like rain/ like a cosmic event....

The young Layla also responds to her memories with attempts to clarify her experiences for both the n.l.c.'s and for herself:

smudges/ i'm soft graphite

i'm clumsy & reckless/ i'm a hazard to  
definitions

I feel/ like an oven  
all black & crusty/ with a huge space to fill up  
with something/<sup>88</sup>

As the play progresses and each memory calls her to acknowledge her personal conflicts, Layla reverts to her responsive "dontcha wanna be music" refrain, only shifting her response as each memory helps her work through her pain.

Music and corresponding moments of dance in this play are cooperative elements in the development of Layla's consciousness and in the progress of the play itself. For this reason, *boogie woogie landscapes* emerges as a culmination of Shange's interest in the role of music in black drama. Shange moves from background music, used in *for colored girls...* and *spell #7*, to the strategy of privileging music in the production.<sup>89</sup> She involves musicians directly in the action of the play. They are consistently visible on stage, and their music identifies certain characters and adds commentary upon the development of the action. As Shange's stage directions emphasize:

aside from the night-life companions, layla also entertains a trio of musicians. the musicians sometimes reflect her consciousness, but more often than not, they side with the night-life interlopers, attempting to refine layla's perceptions of herself and her past... the band enters virtually thru the walls, giving us the first instance of the presence of spirits & an attitude toward life that makes fantasies tangible.<sup>90</sup>

Through these devices Layla and her n.l.c.'s explore, in addition to black female adolescence, questions of

romantic/sexual love, the threat of rape, political isolation, and black family failure. Fluid characterization in the creation of these photographs of black life ultimately establishes for Layla an oppositional synthesis of spiritual and secular celebration of life, as the n.l.c.'s walk through walls, transition into other characters and other memories, both becoming, and remaining separate from, Layla. Through incongruous renditions of black psyche, as in the case of Layla, and the barflies of spell #7, Shange's drama follows a trajectory similar to the more subtle but still challenging artistic demands of Kennedy's drama.

"Deform n Maim" the Language

From the moment one reads the first page of Shange's writing, issues of language form arise. Shange insists on the challenge of language in her own vision of cultural and political resistance. As she argues in one essay, critics have

accused me of being too self-conscious of being a writer [and have] asserted that i waz so involved with the destruction of the english language/ that my writing approached verbal gymnastics like unto a reverse minstrel show.<sup>91</sup>

This seemingly malign reference to Shange's writing as a kind of minstrelsy is fascinating in its complex reversal. Shange's caricature of standard English, accomplished through alterations in spelling, vocabulary, and punctuation, attempts to interrupt in very direct, tangible ways the language's ideological hold on distributions of power, a hold she sees as a "straitjacket that the english language slips over the minds of all americans."<sup>92</sup>

Shange further asserts that American standard English "perpetuates the notions that cause pain to every black child as he/she learns to speak of the world & the self."<sup>93</sup> Her stance on language invites a certain emphasis toward black self-representation in language more reflective of black experience. This view touches upon Houston Baker's description of an African-American art that incorporates the vernacular. In terms of blues, for example, Baker considers the vernacular a necessary part of depicting African-American life; it is an "ancestral matrix that has produced a forceful and indigenous American creativity."<sup>94</sup> But where Baker is referring to a vernacular framed from African-American musical history, Shange is insisting on a vernacular based in the development of African-American vernacular language. Working from within the frame of language, Shange concentrates on the performative implications of voice and undermines a more reified medium of communication.

Shange's response to the critics who have been alarmed by her contortions of the English language is defiant; she argues that the critic

who thought I waz self-conscious of being a writer/  
apparently waz never a blk child who knew that no  
blk people conducted themselves like amos n  
andy/...she waznt a blk child who spoke english  
that had evolved naturally/ only to hear a white  
man's version of blk speech that waz entirely made  
up & based on no linguistic system besides the  
language of racism.<sup>95</sup>

Shange subsequently explains her response to this "language of racism," evident in her intent that her writing succeed in

outdoing the white man in the acrobatic  
distortions of english.... i cant count the number  
of times i have viscerally wanted to attack deform  
n main the language that I waz taught to hate  
myself in.... yes/ being an african-american writer  
is something to be self-conscious abt/<sup>96</sup>

She substantiates her strategies of reconfiguring the language  
of racism as a visually produced black vernacular to serve in  
her own artistic and political resistance; she argues,

in order to think n communicate the thoughts and  
feelings I want to think n communicate/ i haveta  
fix my tool to my needs/ I have to take it apart to  
the bone/ so that the malignancies/ fall away/  
leaving us space to literally create our own  
image.<sup>97</sup>

Her first creative work, *for colored girls...*, exhibits a  
number of disruptive language devices. Shange ignores  
capitalization routinely, allowing the beginnings of sentences  
and the first person singular pronoun to remain on the same  
footing with other words and letters. Capitalization occurs  
only infrequently in complete words, proper or common, for  
emphasis, as in the example of TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE. In  
addition, Shange injects the ampersand or the letter "n," as  
representative of the coordinating conjunction "and," into her  
stream of language, suggesting a certain informality while at  
the same time repeatedly arresting the reader's eye. Spelling  
is often redefined, bent toward black phonetic or colloquial  
pronunciations of words, such as in the invention of the  
contraction "watcha" for the phrase 'what you,' or as visual  
disruption through, for example, the consistent spelling of  
the past tense of the verb "to be" as "waz." Punctuation is  
also deliberately subverted with infrequent and inconsistent

use of periods, apostrophes, commas; these are often replaced with the slash as an indicator of pause or completion of thought. Similar strategies occur in her plays *spell #7, a photograph: lovers in motion*, and *boogie woogie landscapes*. What is perhaps most telling about these experiments of language is that even these modifications lack a systematic consistency one might anticipate in a new system of orthography. The inconsistency in Shange's inconsistencies negates any sense of comfort or composure one might attempt to acquire in analyzing her poetic orthography. Shange's ultimate commentary upon the strictures of language are perhaps here imbedded in the unconcerned lack of predictable order of her language disruptions. This intentional confusion is an effective challenge of assumptions inherent in language systems, and further undermines the narratives of "acceptable" speech.

Interestingly enough Shange's prose seems to follow a more modified progression in its eventual radicalization than her creative texts do. In her prose piece "A History: for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf," which was contemporary with the first Broadway production of the play in 1976, Shange's language still maintains much of the standard form. In this essay, capitalization is still consistent; punctuation with commas, periods, and apostrophes for the most part remains intact. Only the ampersand and Shange's insistence on the occasional spelling of "waz" seem to attempt to disrupt the prose. Yet



embedded in the penultimate paragraph of "A History," is the implication that, for Shange, creative writing and prose writing are at this early stage in her art still distinctly separate terrains of resistance:

I had never imagined not doing for colored girls.... It waz just my poems, any poems I happened to have. Now I have left the show on Broadway, to write poems, stories, plays, my dreams. For colored girls...is either too big for my off-off Broadway taste, or too little for my exaggerated sense of freedom, held over from seven years of improvised poetry readings. Or, perhaps, the series has actually finished itself. Poems come on their own time: *i am offering these to you as what i've received from this world so far.* (my emphasis)<sup>98</sup>

Shange's last sentence in this paragraph ostensibly works as a transition device from the predominantly consistent standard form of her prose writing to the radicality of her poetic discourse. The last three lines which follow this paragraph and end the piece are italicized and take on the poetic orthography of Shange's creative writing:

*i am on the other side of the rainbow/ picking up  
the pieces of days spent waitin for the poem to be  
heard/ while you listen/ i have other work to do/*

In her 1976 article "takin a solo," however, much of Shange's poetic orthography had migrated to her prose writing as well. Only her use of apostrophes, periods and questions marks remained consistently present. Between 1976 and 1980 Shange's prose takes on all aspects of her poetic orthography, in such articles as, for example, "Unrecovered Losses" and "How I Moved Anna Fierling to the Southwest Territories." Shange seems during this time to develop the genres of prose and

poetry as equally fruitful in their occasion for resistant orthographic symbology.

Although Shange continued to publish some prose pieces in a more standard form in and after 1981, her work in the disruption of English spelling, vocabulary, punctuation and rules of consistency was a powerful avenue in black dramatic language that in many ways paralleled Kennedy's strivings for the development of resistance techniques as a medium for the re-interpretation of monolithic images of African-American community. Shange's work with masking also evokes the postcolonial implications of oppression in the dynamics of African-American identity. The more recent works of Suzan-Lori Parks attempts a similar postmodern positioning through a unique vision of drama that privileges the uncooperative text, emphasizes the rewriting of history and examines the tensions of vernacular and the written word as devices to approach African-American identity and community.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ntozake Shange, "Unrecovered Losses/ Black Theater Traditions," See *No Evil: Prefaces, Essays & Accounts 1976-1983* (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1984) 18. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>2</sup> Shange, "Unrecovered," 18.

<sup>3</sup> It is of course necessary to note that the term *colonized* is used here in its broader context. The concept of African-Americans being colonized socially and economically within the confines of their own home country, the U.S., is not new.

<sup>4</sup> Ntozake Shange, "Program Note," See *No Evil: Prefaces, Essays & Accounts 1976-1983* (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1984) 22. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>5</sup> Frantz Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled: Appendix," *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965) 65.

<sup>6</sup> Shange, "Program Note," 22.

<sup>7</sup> Frantz Fanon, "The Algerian Family," *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965) 99.

<sup>8</sup> Ntozake Shange, "A History: for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf," See *No Evil: Prefaces, Essays & Accounts 1976-1983* (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1984) 13. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>9</sup> Shange, "A History," 17.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994) 156.

<sup>11</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984) 117.

<sup>12</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990) 59.

<sup>13</sup> hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 118.

<sup>14</sup> hooks, *Yearning*, 59.

<sup>15</sup> Shange, for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf (New York: Macmillan, 1975) 17. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>16</sup> Winifred Woodhull, "Sexuality, Power, and the Question of Rape" *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, eds. Irene Diamond & Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1988) 171-172.

- <sup>17</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975) 4.
- <sup>18</sup> hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 118.
- <sup>19</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 154.
- <sup>20</sup> Shange, *for colored girls*, 19.
- <sup>21</sup> Shange, *for colored girls*, 18-19.
- <sup>22</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 34.
- <sup>23</sup> Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 32.
- <sup>24</sup> Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 27.
- <sup>25</sup> Woodhull, "Sexuality, Power," 172.
- <sup>26</sup> Woodhull, "Sexuality, Power," 175.
- <sup>27</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 225.
- <sup>28</sup> Shange, *for colored girls*, 64.
- <sup>29</sup> Shange, *for colored girls*, 56.
- <sup>30</sup> Shange, *for colored girls*, 57.
- <sup>31</sup> Shange, "Program Note," 23.
- <sup>32</sup> Shange, "Program Note," 22.
- <sup>33</sup> Shange, *for colored girls*, 44.
- <sup>34</sup> Ntozake Shange, "Movement/ Melody/ Muscle/ Meaning/ McIntyre," See *No Evil: Prefaces, Essays & Accounts 1976-1983* (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1983) 38. All further citations refer to this text.
- <sup>35</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 81.
- <sup>36</sup> Shange, "Program Note," 24.
- <sup>37</sup> Shange, *for colored girls*, 43.
- <sup>38</sup> Shange, *for colored girls*, 41-42.
- <sup>39</sup> Shange, *for colored girls*, 63-64.
- <sup>40</sup> Ntozake Shange, *spell #7: geechee jibara quik magic trance manual for technologically stressed third world people, Three Pieces* (New

York: St. Martin's Press, 1981) 7. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>41</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 13.

<sup>42</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 7-8.

<sup>43</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 13.

<sup>46</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 13.

<sup>47</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 38.

<sup>48</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 36.

<sup>49</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 26.

<sup>50</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 27

<sup>51</sup> Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1993) 82.

<sup>52</sup> Abdul R. JanMohammed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," "Race," *Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 82.

<sup>53</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 47.

<sup>54</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 47.

<sup>55</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 48.

<sup>56</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 48.

<sup>57</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 49.

<sup>58</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 49.

<sup>59</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 52.

<sup>60</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 52.

<sup>61</sup> Shange, *spell* #7, 52.

<sup>62</sup> Shange, "Program Note," 23.

<sup>63</sup> Ntozake Shange, "A Celebration of Black Survival," See *No Evil: Prefaces, Essays, & Accounts 1976-1983* (San Francisco: Momo's press, 1984) 50. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>64</sup> Shange, "Program Note," 22.

<sup>65</sup> Shange, "Program Note," 20.

<sup>66</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 194.

<sup>67</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 194.

<sup>68</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 217.

<sup>69</sup> Ntozake Shange, "takin a solo/ a poetic possibility/ a poetic imperative," See *No Evil: Prefaces, Essays & Accounts 1976-1983* (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1984) 26. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>70</sup> Ntozake Shange, "How I Moved Anna Fierling To the Southwest Territories: or my personal victory over the armies of western civilization," See *No Evil: Prefaces, Essays & Accounts 1976-1983* (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1984) 34. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>71</sup> Shange, "takin a solo," 28.

<sup>72</sup> Shange, "takin a solo," 26-27.

<sup>73</sup> Shange, "takin a solo," 31.

<sup>74</sup> Shange, "takin a solo," 31-32.

<sup>75</sup> Shange, "takin a solo," 32-33.

<sup>76</sup> Shange, "A History," 14-16.

<sup>77</sup> Willis Richardson, "The Negro Audience," *Opportunity* (April 1925) 123.

<sup>78</sup> These theorists included Du Bois who in 1926 in his "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre" considers the impact of audience, as well as minstrel stereotypes on the inadequate development in black theater: "the Negro is already in the theatre and has been for a long time; but his presence there is not yet thoroughly normal. His audience is mainly a white audience, and the Negro actor has, for a long time, been asked to entertain this more or less alien group. He has been a minstrel, comedian, singer, and lay figure of all sorts. Only recently has he begun tentatively to emerge as an ordinary human being with everyday reactions. And here he is still handicapped and put forth with much hesitation" (*The Crisis*, July 1926, 134). Locke felt that in order to "struggle up out of the shambles of minstrelsy" black dramatic art "must more and more have the courage to be original, to break with established dramatic conventions of all sorts. It must have the courage to develop its own idiom, to pour

itself into new molds; in short, to be experimental," "The Negro and the American Stage" *Theatre Arts Monthly* 10 ( 1926): 113, 116.

<sup>79</sup> Montgomery Gregory, "The Drama of Negro Life," *Anthology of the American Negro in the Theatre, 1925*, ed. Lindsay Patterson (New York: Publisher's Co., 1969) 29.

<sup>80</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963) 312-313.

<sup>81</sup> Shange, "Unrecovered," 19.

<sup>82</sup> Shange, "Unrecovered," 19.

<sup>83</sup> Shange, "Unrecovered," 20.

<sup>84</sup> Shange, "Unrecovered," 18-19.

<sup>85</sup> Shange, "Unrecovered," 20.

<sup>86</sup> Ntozake Shange, *boogie woogie landscapes, Three Pieces* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981) 113.

<sup>87</sup> Shange, *boogie woogie landscapes*, 114.

<sup>88</sup> Shange, *boogie woogie landscapes*, 115.

<sup>89</sup> Shange actually does include a musician in spell #7. The actor/character Ross is identified as a "guitarist-singer" (3), yet only one reference to his performing is made in the play: "ross has been playing acoustic guitar softly as lou spoke" (28).

<sup>90</sup> Shange, *boogie woogie landscapes*, 113.

<sup>91</sup> Shange, "Program Note," 21.

<sup>92</sup> Shange, "Program Note," 21.

<sup>93</sup> Shange, "Program Note," 21.

<sup>94</sup> Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 2.

<sup>95</sup> Shange, "Program Note," 21.

<sup>96</sup> Shange, "Program Note," 21.

<sup>97</sup> Shange, "Program Note," 21.

<sup>98</sup> Shange, "A History," 17.

CHAPTER 4  
PERFORMATIVE REFUSALS IN THE DRAMA OF SUZAN-LORI PARKS

Like Shange, Susan-Lori Parks offers a postmodern slant to African-American literature by insisting on the recognition and deployment of language as an unruly medium for interrogating broad narratives of African-American experience. In fact, her development of language far exceeds in innovation Shange's exciting initial disruptions of standard English. Parks further employs this disruptive language in her vision of "drama of accumulation" as dramatic art that, in its emphasis on artistic dramatic individuality, as opposed to the conventional race or protest play, parallels the movement away from monolithic notions of black experience. She makes clear her intent to write something other than the drama of oppression and conflict:

What happens when we choose a concern other than the race problem to focus on? What kind of drama do we get?

Let's look at the math:  
BLACK PEOPLE + "WHITEY" =

STANDARD DRAMATIC CONFLICT  
(STANDARD TERRITORY)  
i.e.

"BLACK DRAMA" = The presentation of the Black as oppressed

so that

WHATEVER the dramatic dynamics, they are most often READ to EQUAL an explanation or relation of Black oppression. This is not only a false equation, this is bullshit.



so that

BLACK PEOPLE + x = NEW DRAMATIC CONFLICT  
(NEW TERRITORY)

where x is the realm of situation showing African-Americans in states other than the Oppressed by/Obsessed with "Whitey" state; where the White when present is not the oppressor, and where audiences are encouraged to see and understand and discuss these dramas in terms other than that same old shit.<sup>1</sup>

This emphasis on the individual necessities of black art undermines the quotidian notion that black writers must write and are only interested in writing for the race, about race, and about oppression.

But perhaps the most striking quality of Parks' work is her evident interest in addressing black female identity and issues of black community through a consistent development of textual strategies of disruption similar to those described by Doris Sommers in her analysis of uncooperative texts, "Resisting the Heat: Menchú, Morrison, and Incompetent Readers." Sommers argues in this article that undecidability in the interpretation of a text offers a terrain of resistance often overlooked, if not ignored, by most readers. The reader in the majority of instances exists in an uninformed or arrogant state of entitlement, always with the expectation of possessing any text. Furthermore, in more difficult textual challenges, the "privileged, trained" reader often attempts to

overcome resistance, to uncover the codes, to get on top of it, to put one's finger on the mechanisms that produce pleasure and pain, and then call it ours. We take up an unyielding book to conquer it and to feel grand, enriched by the appropriation and confident that our cunning is equal to the

textual tease that had, after all, planned its own submission as the ultimate climax of reading.<sup>2</sup>

Difficulty in a text is, then, most often seen as a strategy that invites readers to engage themselves in "coy" barriers that "enhance desire for the chase." But, Sommers contends, not all resistant texts work toward a challenge that offers the "spice of struggle" as its reward for diligence. Certain authors in their texts establish resistance in order to "intentionally" create a "self-authorizing struggle that incites desire in order to chasten it."<sup>3</sup>

Such texts elicit an incompetent reader, and are, therefore, uncooperative, forcing readers toward "respecting the distances and refusals that some texts have been broadcasting to our still deaf ears."<sup>4</sup> One purpose of this refusal in uncooperative texts would be to deploy a "strategic invitation to exclusion." Here the reader, who often overrides refusals of such texts because they offer unclear, unanticipated, unrecognizable patterns of resistance, is encouraged to anticipate resistance in "unyielding texts," building an "expectation of calculated rebuff" and creating a "provisional vocabulary for the patterns and tropes of resistance."<sup>5</sup> Sommers concludes that the ultimate purpose in a textual strategy of "intransigence and refusal" is to

cast doubt on our capacity to know, without allowing incapacity to float into the comforting, unmanageable, mists of ambiguity...to decline the intimately possessive knowledge that passes for love.<sup>6</sup>

But she argues that such relations between text and reader can only come with the eventual development of readers competent in their incompetence, particularly in the investigation of texts that exploit cultural difference.<sup>7</sup> As the effects of textual inaccessibility seem for the most part undecidable and disorderly, it follows that Sommers' culturally alienating texts could serve as performative models for expressing the tensions that dominate the complexities of social and political experience, particularly in the cases of racial and sexual difference. Parks' plays are a powerful example of works that approach the possibilities of uncooperative, resistant texts. She has developed through radicality in form and language her own challenging vision of a drama that expresses the many levels of African-American identity and community.

The most distinctive operatives in Parks' dramatic resistant texts are her provocative adaptations of jazz traditions and African-American vernacular. Each of these areas seems chosen because of its possibilities as terrain for radical revision and celebration of the shifting parameters of African-American community, and for its diminished accessibility to uninitiated readers. These strategies underwrite Parks' work as part of a developing African-American dramatic tradition--enhanced by her counterparts Kennedy and Shange--that re-presents from a postmodern perspective the political and social effects of oppression on African-American verbal and mythic representations of self and

community. For Parks, resistance in her work begins with an investigation of the question of accessibility and consumability of culture and language via textual experience of the reader.

The relationship between text and reader/spectator is, in Parks' dramatic vision, rife with power relations that she attempts to exploit through her own acts of revising the repetition/revision tradition of African-American signifying. Parks thus in some ways exercises the power of the trickster figure, an image very much in keeping with African-American vernacular expression. The trickster figure in African-American experience is a vehicle for negotiating and manipulating white discourses of oppression. Signifying is the means by which the trickster figure accomplishes these negotiations. Henry Louis Gates, proffering the Signifying Monkey as a potent example of an African-American trickster figure, argues that the trickster is "figured in a densely structured discursive universe, one absolutely dependent on the play of differences."<sup>8</sup> Parks as the trickster playwright works within this dense discursive field, creating through her dramatic technique figurative moments of difference confronting the reader through compressed repetition, revision, and vernacular codes as she confronts issues of black identity and community.

Parks as trickster playwright creates in *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1989), for example, a style that has appropriated signs of racial ignorance,

stereotyping, as powerful devices in her rendition of signifying. As in black experience where the trickster has "perfectly fused the arts of concealing and contesting racial stereotypes,"<sup>9</sup> Parks deploys characters whose concentrated images work toward immediate alienation and discomfort for those most enticed and repulsed by such stereotyping.

This strategy of othering those who cannot evade the discomfiture of the stereotype is introduced and illustrated by character names such as Black Woman with Fried Drumstick, Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork, Yes and Greens Black-eyed Peas Cornbread, Old Man River Jordan, and Black Man with Watermelon. Through these figures, Parks creates stereotype as an operative mask for her characters. The stereotypical naming of each character in the play and the contrasting demeanor of the same characters in response to these stereotypes are an emphatic recognition of the automatic nature of stereotypical thinking and the capacity of the object of such thinking to refuse that location. Parks operates here in a way similar to the defiant trickster, the signifying monkey, who clarifies for all, "I am the monkey that can call itself so."<sup>10</sup> In this intentionally exclusionary stance created through the reversal of stereotype, the trickster figure makes the label his own and refuses access to it for those not privy to the monkey's manner of self-naming. Parks seems in her art to attempt a similar stance, claiming the ability for African-Americans to name the self, while retaining the right of distance over the naming through the alienating devices of her texts. The

resultant outsider position reverses the implications of belonging and not belonging and forces the experience of otherness upon the culturally or verbally unschooled.

Parks claims through the stereotype a self-informed ownership here and accomplishes the capacity to "know and deploy one's own power, gifts, and qualities in relation to others."<sup>11</sup> Claiming the stereotype is but one part of a performative writing into existence of one's own message, one's own power, a concept similar to Kennedy's depiction of writing oneself into being in her drama, and introduces Parks' signifying, uncooperative texts as her terrain for a subversive rewriting of history, of dramatic form, and of language to the dimensions of African-American demand.

Parks also deploys stereotype within the uncooperative text as a device to explore the location of women within the black community. Although Parks uses her female figures as part of her strategy of naming the self, she at the same time exploits the opportunity to examine Black Woman With Fried Drumstick as a figure of stereotypical black womanhood.

Black Woman With Fried Drumstick is a figure of comfort and support. As the Last Black Man struggles for his life, dignity, and freedom, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick hovers constantly near him. She, along with the other characters whose names refer to black ethnic food, offers him the comforts of home, of good, lovingly prepared food, the smells of the kitchen. Her dialogue is reactive and conciliatory, and almost always ends with a reference to food:

Told me tuh pack up your clothes.... Bury your  
ring in his hidin spot under the porch! Didnt have  
a ring so I didnt do diddly.... You got away. Knew  
you would. Hen?<sup>12</sup>

In one of many other instances Black Woman again juxtaposes  
escape and freedom with comforting food:

Hen mine? Gobble it up. You got uhway. Fixed uh  
good big hen dinner for you. Get yourself a  
mouthful afore it rots.<sup>13</sup>

Black Woman with Drumstick does not express herself primarily  
in any terms other than her concern for the sufferings and  
danger that the Last Black Man has had and is experiencing.  
Parks is perhaps lending here an ironic emphasis to the  
tertiary location of women of color in the annals of  
traditional history. She determines that their position has  
been significant only in relation to the experiences of their  
male counterparts, which is in turn secondary to the dominance  
of white males.

Yet Parks' other major female figure, Queen-Then-Pharoah  
Hatshepsut, seems to counterbalance this inferior image of  
women of color in history. She is Parks' answer to the inert  
status of Black Woman With Fried Drumstick. No matter how  
hard Black Woman tries, she cannot even succeed in getting the  
Last Black Man to eat her food. While rebellious to outside  
white authority, she is still ineffectual in her domestic  
representations. Queen, however, although a distant and less  
frequently seen character in the play, is an admirable female  
figure of history. As a strong image of women of color, she  
not only claims a place in history but also interprets history

for others. Hers is a position of strength, of direction,  
of warning:

I saw Columbus comin./I saw Columbus comin goin  
over tuh visit you. "To borrow a cup of sugar," so  
he said. I waved my hands in warnin. You waved  
back. I aint seen you since.<sup>14</sup>

In this juxtaposition of two female characters in the black community, Parks introduces an ongoing, if not always central, conversation in her works about the issues of black women in their community and the role they might play in the rewriting of African-American history.

#### Rewriting History Via Drama of Accumulation

Parks argues that a rewriting of African-American history through a signifying and alienating text provides room for the liberation of black self-perception and self-representation even though, and precisely because, the practice itself may, usefully, not be readily accessible or acceptable to certain readers. In this approach she is clearly iterating the performance strategies of Kennedy and Shange. Parks' distinctive method in her dramatic project, however, occurs as the content of her plays addresses various stances in history, looking at the possibilities of black history and the dynamics of contemporary African-American histories in terms of black communal identity. Parks emphasizes the question of mutable history, the possibilities of rewriting "history of literature...[and] the history of history," particularly as reviewing history can sustain African-American realities. A play for her is a



blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature. Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to "make" history--that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright is to--through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life--locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.<sup>15</sup>

Parks' notion of the "special strange relationship" existing between the real and the theater anticipates an interaction between reader/spectator and dramatic texts in terms of the impact of "new history" upon "real-life."<sup>16</sup> This new history is written through Parks' signifying drama, which becomes a performative "incubator to create 'new' historical events..., re-membling" history in its remembering and in its "staging of historical events" as ways of engaging the present conditions of African-Americans through an African-centered (re)vision of the past. As Parks concludes, "the bones tell us what was, is, will be;...their song is a play--something that through a production *actually happens*."<sup>17</sup>

For example, Parks' (re)vision of history is demonstrated in the first few lines of the play by the female protagonist, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick. Mutable history is illustrated through a startling seepage of time:

Yesterday today next summer tomorrow just uh moment uhgo in 1317 dieded tuh last black man in thuh whole entire world. Uh! Oh. Don't be unharmed. Do not be afear'd. It was painless. Uh painless passin. He falls twenty-three floors to his death. 23 floors from a passin ship from space tuh splat on thuh pavement.<sup>18</sup>

The indiscriminate synthesis of time markers in this speech is delivered through several characters at least three other times in the play. In the second instance the sequence occurs in this manner:

Yesterday tuhday next summer tuhorrow just uh moment uhgoh in 1317 dieded thuh last black man in thuh whole entire world. Uh! Oh! Dont be uhlarmed. Do not be afeared. It was painless. Uh painless passin. He falls 23 floors to his death.<sup>19</sup>

Rather than coming out of events occurring chronologically in these sequences, meaning here slowly evolves as to the historical placement of the Last Black Man. Subtle shifts in spelling and vocabulary also aid in the cumulative effects of this repetition and revision. The most obvious of these is, significantly, the manner in which death occurs for the Last Black Man, forever attached to a watermelon and, thus, called Black Man with Watermelon. He dies over and over, from falling from a ship, from execution in an electric chair, from lynching.

Through accumulation, then, rather than time logically presented for meaning in these sequences, the dilemma of a non-African-centered historical placement of the Last Black Man is revealed. Labeled as the last black man and rendered in death in such mythically loaded ways, outside of linear time, he reiterates the death of each African individual over a span of time who has/is/will die as a result of racist oppression.

Black Woman With Fried Drumstick both laments the fate of the Last Black Man and celebrates his return:

Comin for you. Came for you: that they done did.  
 Comin for tuh take you. Told me tuh pack up your  
 clothes. Told me tuh cut my bed in 2 from double  
 tuh single. Cut off thuh bed-foot where your feets  
 had rested. Told me tuh do that too. Bury your ring  
 in his hidin spot under thuh porch! That they told  
 me too to do. Didnt have uh ring so I didnt do  
 diddly. They told and told and told: proper  
 instructions for thuh burial proper attire for thuh  
 mournin. They told and told and told: I didnt do  
 squat. Awe on that. You comed back. You got uhway.  
 Knew you would. Hen?

The Last Black Man has died, but he has also escaped and continues to do so throughout the play. Black Woman With Fried Drumstick provides here a commentary perhaps on the resilience of enslaved Africans over time, their abilities to both die and yet provide for those that follow some form of continuing hope, of identity that will ultimately allow the Last Black Man to live again through them and, thus, not be the Last Black Man. Black Woman With Drumstick's resistance to "they" is rewarded by rejuvenation of life. She is in "Awe" of her own strength and resilience and of the Last Black Man's as well.

In this case of re-membering African-American racial and historical consciousness, Parks' form works as an eloquent vessel for the development of content. Poetic and cumulative repetition produce meaning in this sequence, as in all others of this play. Parks declares in reference to this strategy that "form and content are interdependent." The new content of re-membered history demands a form equally disruptive, since

the container dictates what sort of substance will fill it and, at the same time, the substance is

dictating the size and shape of the container.  
 ..."[F]orm" is not a strictly "outside" thing while  
 "content" stays "inside."<sup>20</sup>

Recreating or signifying on history is not feasible for Parks via "those structures [that] could never accommodate the figures which take up residence inside me;" instead it is necessary for her to "explode the form" since radicalized content requires configurations which are both independent and unruly.<sup>21</sup> Thus access to the new value of x is intentionally neither straightforward nor automatic; in Parks' plays access is attempted through complex, jazz-informed repetition and revision working as new opportunities for readers/spectators to confront a dramatic "new territory."

Parks does not seem able, however, ultimately to resist refiguring the past simply as past. In Panel I (one of five panels), the character Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut is the first character used to reveal this inclination:

Before Columbus thuh worl usta be roun they put uh  
 /d/ on thuh end of roun makin round. Thusly they  
 set in motion thuh end. Without that /d/ we coulda  
 gone on spinnin forever. Thuh /d/ thing ended  
 things ended.<sup>22</sup>

But the revised repetition of Queen's words provided by the character Before Columbus, while working further toward meaning in this version of history, moves further away from a straightforward rendition of it, and in this way culminates as an unruly irruption of shifting meaning that denies Parks her attempts to ultimately address past simply as past.

The popular thinking of the day back in them days  
 was that the world was flat. They thought the world  
 was flat. Back then when they thought the world was

flat they were afeared and stayed home. They wanted to go out back then when they thought the world was flat but the water had in it dragons of which meaning these dragons they were afeared back then when they thought the world was flat. They stayed at home. Them thinking the world was flat kept it roun. Them thinking the sun revolved around the earth kept them satellite-like. They figured out the truth and scurried out. Figuring out the truth put them in their place and they scurried out to put us in ours.<sup>23</sup>

This re-reading of pre-colonial history and related passages occur over seven times in the play. Each repetition exhibits shifts in language and imagery, producing a changeable collage of detail that accumulates meaning but does not ever render a specific clarity of historical events to the reader/spectator.

In Panel II the passage shifts most radically. Not only has Before Columbus's language transformed into Parks' neo-vernacular (Parks' own adaptation of African-American vernacular English) and a communal audience, "kin," is named, but an irruption of the written text as medium and modifier of history is also revealed:

BEFORE COLUMBUS: Thuh popular thinkin kin of thuh day back then in them days was that thuh worl was flat. They thought thuh worl was flat. Back then kin in them days when they thought thuh worl was flat they were afeared and stayed at home. They wanted tuh go out back then when they thought thuh worl was flat but thuh water had in it dragons.

AND BIGGER AND BIGGER AND BIGGER: Not lurkin in thuh sea but lurkin in thuh street, see? Sir name Tom-us and Bigger be my christian name. Rise up out of uh made-up story in grown Bigger and Bigger. Too big for my own name. Nostrils flarin. Width: thickly. Breath: fire-laden and smellin badly.

BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: Huh, Whiffit.

BEFORE COLUMBUS: Dragons, of which meanin these dragons they were afeared back then. When they

thought thuh worl was flat. They stayed at home.  
Them thinkin thuh worl was flat kept it roun....<sup>24</sup>

Bigger and Bigger and Bigger is a character leaping from the pages of literature into the rewriting project of the other characters. His sudden appearance within history, attempting to shift its focus and its meaning, is a self-conscious reference to the power of the written text in the making of history and to the unreliability of Parks' own project of re-writing history.

Bigger and Bigger and Bigger, as an allusive reworked figure of Richard Wright's protagonist in *Native Son*, relates the unworkable growth of his (Bigger and Bigger's) significance, larger than his own name can contain. He is Bigger Tom-us. As an altered version of the proverbial "Tom," representing the weakness, fear and anger of the black "us" and with thick nostrils flared in a beastly posture breathing fires of rage, much like Wright's Bigger Thomas, the literary image of Bigger and Bigger and Bigger, Parks suggests, produces with its uncontrollable growth a sociological and racial stereotype that is more powerful than its own origin.

Parks emphasizes here the importance of written text in the making of realities. Her play is preoccupied with the power of the written word. Yes and Greens Black-eyed Peas Cornbread, in a series of ten performatively obtuse, continually revised repetitions of the following lines in the play, reveals the word's significance by declaring to the other characters:

You should write it down because if you dont write it down then they will come along and tell the future that we did not exist. You should write it down and hide it under a rock. You should write down the past and you should write down the present and in what in the future you should write it down. It will be of us but you should mention them from time to time so that in the future when they come along and know they exist. You should hide it all under a rock so that in the future when they come along they will say the rock did not exist.<sup>25</sup>

The language in this passage also takes on neo-vernacular form as the lines of this sequence are revised by other characters. This strategy illustrates an elusive element imbedded in Parks' deployment of the vernacular: a subversive restructuring of notions of opposition between the vernacular and the written. Parks seems to broach here Gates' concept of the Speakerly Text. According to Gates, Speakerly Texts demonstrate the "possibilities of representation of the speaking black voice in writing."<sup>26</sup> Referring to Zora Neale Hurston as an example, Gates argues that the Speakerly Text combines black speech with initial standard English, producing a "third term..., a truly double-voiced narrative mode." Gates' point is particularly applicable to Parks' use of language. Her syncretic representations and revisions of language blur the assumed boundaries between vernacular and the written text, challenging traditional narratives of dichotomized discourse and offering new terrain for the expression of African-Americans as "speaking black subjects."<sup>27</sup>

Significantly, as the penultimate revision of Yes and Greens Black-eyed Peas Cornbread demonstrates, "you should write that down. You should write that down and you should

hide it under uh rock," this passage is one of the few sequences that all of the characters, in agreement with Yes an Greens Black-eyed Peas Cornbread, say together in the play, thus reinforcing their unified recognition of the importance of the word as spoken and written.<sup>28</sup>

In the play other repeated syncretisms of written and vernacular are numerous. The characters mention a "page dog-eared at Histree" and a "word hoard."<sup>29</sup> There are at least eight references by several different characters to "thuh turnin" page of history. And characters referring to a "made up story" contribute to the implications of this meditation upon vernacular and the written word in terms of the construction and reliability of historical record and of subjective voice.<sup>30</sup> The cumulative nature of these implications leaves the reader/spectator to interpret an impressionistic rendition of the written word as also black orality.

Parks deploys her dramatic writing here as a performative and resistant act, which creates through the possibilities of an, at times, alienating text the ineluctable connections among writing, fallibility, and transmission of histories. As only one portion of the accumulation of meaning created by the many descriptive sequences of this play, the value and significance of these consistently revised passages on "writing" develop her notion of drama of accumulation, which ultimately is Park's development of the layered presentation of meaning and action as each of her plays progresses. Such



drama of accumulation problematizes at the same time consumability of the text and of constructed histories.

Furthermore, Parks is careful to examine the dangers of misreading the value of the past for those seeking some valorization in its possibilities. Her play *Pickling* (1988) is a cautionary against the perils of idealizing the past. Miss Miss, the only character in the play, gives a running narrative which, although set continuously in the present, seems only to concern itself with the past. Again, the development of meaning is accomplished through repetition and revision of images, actions, and moments that Miss Miss divulges.

Miss Miss is an agoraphobic character, determined to remain home:

Ssgood Ive got everythin I need right here at my fingertips never need to go outside is overwhelming sstoo much. Havent been out since. Synce uh comedinlass. Hee!<sup>31</sup>

She is also determined to safeguard her remembrances because "There are people starving you know. People going without."<sup>32</sup> Her phobia is brought on by an unhealthy obsession with preserving memories, pickling the past, literally. Her one brief, healthy love encounter is itself irrevocably affected by her obsession. Charles, her brave, athletic, life-guard lover, whom she calls her "professional savior," balks when he finds that in addition to photographs as mementos, Miss Miss has preserved in pickling jars a number of interesting items: sand and a condom from their first encounter, nuts and bolts

from her old refrigerator, the smile of her dead mother in the form of her gums, which were red but have "gone a little black now," and pieces of her mother's hair which when dyed changed from black to red. She had "Pickledem." Miss Miss mentions that Charles

didnt understand thuh jars. Didnt get it. Them. Thuh jars. Showed him mother. What I saved. Her photograph went over well enough. Didnt find fault with her picture but did mind her parts isnt that always thuh way.<sup>33</sup>

Miss Miss begins to ask "Something to remember you by?" as Charles accuses her of Voodoo and their interaction shifts; she begins to suspect that Charles only comes to eat the pickled beets Miss Miss continually prepared with her mother when she was alive, that Charles only comes to enjoy "the juicy.... Emptying my jars. Mines." Subsequently, her question permutes, "something tuh re-member you by."<sup>34</sup> The play ends where it begins, Miss Miss reminiscing, illustrating each point by showing her jars and beginning again; Charles is gone. If he is not dead, Miss Miss wishes him so:

Voodoo? Damn right. Eat one beet uh day. Dont wanna waste nothing. Slip back into thuh river lingo gentle-like then from thuh river we float out tuh the sea. Nothin tuh carry along. Nothing saved. No momentos--No saviors--all left. Gone out. Aint nowhere else tuh go but out. Now. Begin: I told him to do it in here. Save it. Now begin. Put it in here. Now begin: Dont want tuh waste none. Now begin: People going. Without. And out. Oh. Like steel he was. Hee! Begin: Steal away. Glide-it uhcross. Oh. Warm steal. Oh Warm. Warm. Oh: To thuh worms. To thuh worms. To thuh worms.<sup>35</sup>

The final libidinal observations of Miss Miss leave unclear how Charles has departed, but either literally or

figuratively he is out. And we are left to contemplate the location of Miss Miss, who cannot get out. Her consistent repetition of "Now begin" suggests that she is stuck in present time, outside of, but unable to break free of, her past. Her veneration of history has destroyed her capacity to live; she will always be forever beginning to go back. Parks' insight into the paralyzing nature of over-romanticizing and idealizing the past tempers her emphasis on engaging history. She reminds us that the past is only as important as its usefulness toward improving the present.

Parks' image of a paralyzed Miss Miss also reiterates the impossible position of many black women who face difficulties in American social economies that are often unrecognized but nonetheless real. Black women are confronted with the challenge of "interlocking structures of race, class, and gender oppression while rejecting and transcending those same structures."<sup>36</sup> As a result of such an ominous outside world, Miss Miss has retreated inward. Her agoraphobia seems an answer to an oppressive society within which she cannot safely maneuver. Miss Miss's mother seems only to have emphasized her skills of pickling, preserving what has gone before. And these skills seem enough while her mother is alive, "there were no empty jars you had your beets and no empty jars." But her mother's death, where she "just--crumbled--" in a "puddle of her own pickling," leaves Miss Miss alone and unable to cope with an empty world. Miss Miss's vulnerability is further exacerbated by the appearance of Charles in her otherwise

closed life. After the fact, Miss Miss is accusatory, claiming that Charles

spied the juicy. Had tuh have him some. Lived next door. Close. Steal away. Goblin the beets on his Thursdays. Smackin lips wipin lips on his wrist. He was sleeveless. Muscle shirt. With arms. On tuh back of his wrists. Eighteen Thursdays of slobbering beet juice back wrists use a napkin please he had hisself developed uh long red beet smear stain. Emptying my jars. Mines.<sup>37</sup>

Miss Miss's jealous regard for her beets, her full jars, "her juicy," constructs implications that go beyond the obvious. Charles has violated not only her cupboard, but her body, her safe place, and her trust. Her inability to cope with his manipulation and rejection leaves her further entrapped in her closed world, further away from personal salvation. Offering little hope for those who have not developed the skills to meet racial, sexual, and social challenges head on, Parks presents here the devastating effects of parasitic relationships on black women. And she seems ultimately to emphasize through Miss Miss's tribulations that African-Americans should have a healthy regard for the dispossessing effect of overemphasizing the power of the past, but must also have a necessary connection to those in the present community, as well as in history, who offer wisdom toward the struggle to survive.

Parks argues that history or time "has a circular shape" as does, consequently, history in her plays.<sup>38</sup> Even in her very short cautionary play *Pickling*, there is circularity in her rendition of time. Because of Parks' insistence on the

derivation of form from content, it is not surprising, then, that her drama of accumulation is underwritten by her choice to use the shifting circularity of jazz form in her plays. As the repetitious and changeable nature of her dramatic sequences suggest, Parks attempts to establish new dramatic configurations most observably through her notion of dramatic "Repetition and Revision ("Rep & Rev")," a rewriting of African-inspired call-response, the earlier form of simple verbal and musical interaction, steeped in the more recent complex musical formulations of jazz aesthetics.<sup>39</sup> Where form and content meet most effectively in her work is in the realm of literature as music.

As her theory insists, jazz formations are the fundamental infrastructure of Parks' dramas. Textual repetition and revision occurs in each of her plays. In *The Death of the Last Black man in the Whole Entire World*, for example, "Rep & Rev"," is in itself "a literal incorporation of the past"<sup>40</sup> in her jazz informed drama. "Rep & Rev" acts as a formulation that buttresses a textually uncooperative re-membering of history. This re-membering is uncooperative in the sense that any reader who lacks familiarity with the function of jazz/blues as a "patiently incremental, not to say heavily repetitious form,"<sup>41</sup> probably will not grasp its meaning. Since such meaning is extended in the manner of musical performance "by repetitions and virtuoso musical interludes," it might "contain a wealth of unique and

transitory features."<sup>42</sup> The result is a relative textual inaccessibility for certain readers.

Parks describes her use of jazz aesthetics as follows:

"Repetition and Revision" is a concept integral to the Jazz esthetic in which the composer or performer will write or play a musical phrase once and again and again; etc.--with each revisit the phrase is slightly revised. "'Rep & Rev'" as I call it is a central element in my work; through its use I'm working to create a dramatic text that departs from the traditional linear narrative style to look and sound more like a musical score....<sup>43</sup>

She thus exposes her intent to use repetition as disruption of linearity and logical progression in American dramatic tradition. However, as with jazz/blues, textual repetition is not a simple element in Parks' work. Its complexity rivals that of poetic "incremental refrain:

For the most part [in poetry] incremental refrain creates a weight and a rhythm. In dramatic writing it does the same--yes; but again, what about all those words over and over? ...its not just repetition but repetition with revision. And in drama change, revision, is the thing. Characters refigure their words and through a refiguring of language show us that they are experiencing their situation anew.<sup>44</sup>

Such textual arrangement informed by jazz through a refiguring of refrains not only refuses consumable textual languages, but, she insists, "breaks from the text which we are told to write--the text which cleanly ARCS." Parks summarizes her fascination with repetition and revision as alternative:

I'm...asking how the structure of "Rep & Rev" and the stories inherent in it--a structure which creates a drama of accumulation--can be accommodated under the rubric of Dramatic Literature where, traditionally, all elements lead the audience toward some single explosive moment.<sup>45</sup>

Parks also seems to recognize the distancing effect that using a musical tradition not easily defined or explained creates for incompetent readers. She is aware of the polymorphous body of jazz form. Much of its power and significance comes from the level of understanding of the audience. And this in itself is necessarily and extremely subjective. As Langston Hughes argues in his "Jazz as Communication," "with you in the middle-jazz is only what you yourself get out of it."<sup>46</sup> If, as Parks the trickster playwright's practice seems to suggest, she is creating a reversal of the dynamic of othering through her alienating textual devices, then the cultural complexities of jazz as a foundation for her plays seems a most apt frame for constructing the incompetent reader/spectator. Parks is, in fact, othering the reader/spectator unschooled in the language and culture of jazz. She iterates the querulous moment described by Louis Armstrong who is purported to have said, "Lady, if you have to ask what it is, you'll never know."<sup>47</sup>

Textual "Rep & Rev" surfaces in its most distilled and, perhaps, most alienating form in Parks' early play *Betting on the Dust Commander* (1987). Here very little observable physical action occurs, and the characters remain seemingly static. The play begins in part A with a slide show of a couple in wedding outfits, with the couple, Mare and Lucius, commenting off stage; moves to the actual presence and verbal interaction on stage between the actors in part B; and finishes with a return to the slide show in part C. In

addition to the alienating effect of the slides, reminiscent of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*,<sup>48</sup> the play distances the reader/spectator through its slow, deliberate repetition of language and slight shifts in revisions that reframe the meaning from the first part, A to the last part, C. Here Parks exhibits her jazz rendered drama in its most direct form.

Part A and part C are identical in their language. They make reference to the couple's plans and preparation for a wedding day. The characters start by discussing replacing fresh flowers with plastic. As in so many of Parks' plays, we see the intent of their comments as again an attempt at negotiating memories, a way of preparing to preserve the past. As Mare observes,

You wanted plastics—I got plastics—mm telling you so. Ssgood luck.... I replaced em all with plastics. It costed. I got every last one.... Expensive plastics got the real look to em, Lucius. Expensive plastics got uh smell. Expensive plastics will last a lifetime but nobody'll know, Lucius. Nobody knows.<sup>49</sup>

Our increased perception and understanding moving from A to the identical C comes from the a-linear, often repetitive motifs that work their way through part B. In this revelatory section the characters have been married for a considerable amount of time; they remember their "weddin" as occurring "one year long ago."<sup>50</sup> But even this event seems in and out of sequenced time. Their recollections are obtuse, as if present and past collide, converge:

Lucius:      Them pictures. Our wedding. Them



pictures of our wedding. What  
 year was that them pictures.  
 Mare: --One year--  
 Lucius: Our weddin. Us weddin.  
 Mare: One year long ago.  
 Lucius: Which year. One year. Long ago.  
 Which one year.  
 Mare: Year one, Lucius, year one. Flowers  
 still fresh. Flowersll last uh  
 lifetime. Nobodyll know. Nobody  
 knows. One year one.<sup>51</sup>

Part B is a continued conversation between these two partners in the relationship. As they tease, admonish, reminisce, and comfort each other through repeated though shifting patterns of language, the strength of their intimacy is revealed.

The variation in this theme prepares the reader/spectator for a new reception of part C. Here the characters again comment off stage. Although identical to part A, their conversation now seems to have acquired new meaning as if the slides no longer are representative of the disembodied voices, but are now fixed visual images of memories, less vibrant, more solid. Our reception and perception of C has shifted, like the final segment of a jazz piece. Repetition here has a new feel, a new meaning. Parks here renders with acuity a most convincing verbal anatomy of a jazz piece. Such a layered presentation of meaning comments upon the politics of perception, revealing how subtly, yet irrevocably, perception is tied to exposure and manipulation of information and, thus, how plastic the truths of history might be. "Rep & Rev" operates in this play as an indication of the development of jazz as fundamental to Parks' work and the significance of signifying in her trickster renditions of a play.

### Deploying the Neovernacular

As explicated above in *Death of the Last Black Man*, "Rep & Rev" occurs through repeating, shifting renditions of passages. However, jazz elements in this play, as well as in others of Parks' oeuvre, are evident in examples that signify directly on language as well. Iterative lines contain within them iterative words which sustain shifts in their spellings, in their order, and in the coining of new words or sounds. Parks has created a neovernacular, derived from African-American vernacular English.

As one of the major sources of Parks' signifying, creative language, African-American vernacular English (AAVE) merits a brief discussion. While there is some controversy as to the actual designation of AAVE--whether it is a language, a dialect, a creole-- most experts do recognize African-American vernacular English as a "distinct system of speech and syntax, a linguistic legacy of slavery and years of isolation."<sup>52</sup> According to John R. Rickford, an African American linguistics specialist at Stanford, one of the most identifiable marks of AAVE is its copula system, an absence or varied arrangement of verb tenses that either ignore or reconstruct standard English verb forms within sentences. For example, the third person singular present progressive form of the verb "to be" in AAVE can range from *he go*, to *he goin'*, to *he be goin'*.<sup>53</sup> Other systemic uses include shifting adjective placement and spelling, omissions, idiomatic expression, and a wide, dynamic

vocabulary, all devices employed by Parks in her revisions of language and history.

Parks starts with these more recognizable forms and then signifies upon them to create distance from the reader through spelling, word order, and the creation of neologisms based upon phonetic placement. Here she seems intent upon making what may already be an inaccessible text to some readers even more so. For example, in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* nouns, verb forms, and adjectives acquire new spelling and form, omissions revise sentence structure, while phonetic spelling arrives at rather interesting and effective neologisms. Black Man with Watermelon, while contemplating the eternal presence of his watermelon, considers,

I kin tell whats mines by whats gots my looks.  
 Ssmymethod. Try to by testin it and it turns out  
 true. Every time. Fool proofly. Look down at my  
 foot and wonder it its mine. Foot mine? I kin ask  
 it and foot answers back with uh "yes Sir"—not like  
 you and me say "yes Sir" but uh "yes Sir" peculiar  
 tuh tuh foot. Foot mine? I kin ask it and through  
 uh look that looks like my looks tuh foot gives me  
 back uh "yes Sir." Ssmymethod. Try by tuh test tuh  
 pass for true. Move on tuh tuh other foot. Foot  
 mine? And uh nother "yes Sir" so feets mine is  
 understood. Got uh forearm thats up for question  
 check myself out teeth by tooth. Melon mines?--  
 Don't look like me.

This passage combines synthesized phonetic spellings to produce an almost lyrical visual as well as aural rendition of disruptive language that works toward a misleadingly simple but decidedly penetrating analysis of racial identity. Black Man counts off and evaluates each aspect of himself "by tuh

test tuh pass for true" and readily accepts it as his, claiming an ownership of self through image and language that express specifically that selfhood. Furthermore, Black Man's ready rejection of the watermelon stigma indicates his clear understanding of the destructive effects of participating in the perpetuation of dominant cultural narratives and of the disruptive possibilities of claiming one's own language in the same way as claiming one's self.

Parks' play *Imperceptible Mutabilities of the Third Kingdom* (1989) also contains powerful linguistic performative signification. Part 2 is an examination of the Third Kingdom, which is the space between Africa and the U.S. often called middle passage, and offers many examples of language revision. Kin-Seer as a character who speaks for those enslaved Africans on slaver ships is concerned with the irreparable psychological damage felt by stolen Africans. There is a sense of a splitting of the self, he claims, a self on one shore, a self on the other, "uh black black speck in thuh middle of thuh sea...." He describes his predicament:

I was standin with my toes stuckted in thuh dirt.  
Nothin in front of me but water. And I was wavin.  
Wavin at my uther me who I could barely see. Over  
thuh water on thuh other cliff I could see my uther  
me but my uther me couldnt see me. And I was wavin  
wavin wavin sayin gaw gaw eeeeeee-uh.<sup>54</sup>

Parks includes here vernacular revision and neologisms, as well as a unique vocabulary of sounds and nonsensical words that express her insistence on language as a "physical act" and that further insists on the direct connection between the

search for identity and the search for a specific, apt form

of verbal expression. Parks is in awe of the impact of words:

Most words have fabulous etymologies. Thrilling histories.... Words are spells in our mouths. My interest in the history of words—where they come from, where they're going—has a direct impact on my playwrighting because, for me, Language is a physical act. It's something that involves your entire body—not just your head. Words are spells which an actor consumes and digests—and through digesting creates a performance on stage. Each word is configured to give the actor a clue to their physical life. Look at the difference between "the" and "thuh." The "uh" requires the actor to employ a different physical, emotional, vocal attack.

In order to address the complexity of producing "physical language," Parks has created her own repertoire of expressive words, sounds, silences. In her plays the stage direction (rest) suggests "Take a little time, a pause, a breather; make a transition." In addition, referring to stage silence Parks indicates (a spell), which is

an elongated and heightened (rest). Denoted by repetition of figures' names with no dialogue. Has sort of an architectural look.<sup>55</sup>

One example of this orchestrated silence occurs in Parks' *The America Play*:

LUCY  
BRAZIL  
THE FOUNDLING FATHER  
LUCY  
BRAZIL  
THE FOUNDLING FATHER.<sup>56</sup>

In this visual display of expressive silence on the stage, Parks recognizes and emphasizes the importance of physical performance in communication, silent response between

characters is as eloquent as any of her language revisions or neologisms might be.

Parks' neologisms are listed in a selective glossary, which she entitles "foreign words & phrases." The glossary is itself lengthy but merits examination. A number of the words in this list are systematically used in the majority of her plays and often express otherwise un-writeable moments of stage communication:

*foreign words & phrases*

iduhnt /íd-ədnt/, a variant of *is not* or *isn't*. "We arent from these parts...Daddy iduhnt either" (*America*).

heud /hé-əd/, a variant of *he would* or *he'd*. "Ssonly natural that heud come out here tuh dig" (*America*).  
do in diddly dip didded thuh drop /dó-in díd-ly-díp-díd-díd-thə-dráhp/, meaning unclear. Perhaps an elaborated confirmation, a fancy "yes!" Although it could also be used as a question such as "Yeah?" (*Last Black Man*).

ssnuch /ssəch!/, (Air intake sound not through mouth or throat but in through the nose.) A fast reverse snort, a big sniff (usually accompanies crying or sneezing). "Snnnnuch. Blowings hard. For me." (*Dust Commander*).

thup /thəp!/, (Air intake with sound placed in mouth; liberal use of tongue.) Slurping. (*Imperceptible Mutabilities*)

uh! or uuh! /əh!/, (Air intake.) Deep quick breath. Usually denotes drowning or breathlessness. "Years uhgoh from uh boat I had been-UUH! Jettisoned" (*Imperceptible Mutabilities*); "...in 1317 dieded thuh last black man in the whole entire world. Uh!" (*Last Black Man*).

thuh /thəh/, variant of *the*. "Thuh ultimate battle of love requires uh good go between" (*Devotees in the Garden of Love*).

Chuh /chə/ The polite form of the expletive "Shit!" (*Dust Commander*)

k /kay/, variant of *okay*. (*America*)

gaw (This is a glottal stop. No forward tongue or lip action here. The root of the tongue snaps or clicks in the back of the throat.) Possible performance variations: a click-clock sound where the tongue tip clicks in the front of the mouth; or

a strangulated articulation of the word Gaw!  
 "gaw gaw gaw eeeee-uh" (*Imperceptible*  
*Mutabilities*).<sup>57</sup>

Similar to Parks' approach to footnotes in her plays and essays--"Most of them are totally made up and ridiculous"<sup>58</sup>-- Parks has fun with her specialized lexicon and sees a certain necessity for humor in her whole endeavor. She points out that

I can get more out of history if I joke with it  
 than if I shake my finger at it and stomp my feet.  
 The approach you take toward your subject really  
 determines what you're going to get. So I say to  
 history, "Anything you want. It's okay, you can  
 laugh."<sup>59</sup>

The seriousness of her work ultimately can not be denied, however, as her renditions of middle passage, black identity and racial oppression clearly demonstrate.

Parks' ironic dig at the complexities of language study and linguistic orthography is a challenge toward monolithic notions of language as science and regulatory system. Her use of specialized words in her plays is a forceful and effective example of an alternative understanding of the role of language in self-determination that moves away from dominant, oppressive narratives of the self and community. And in spite of or perhaps because they are difficult to recognize or understand without the aid of the glossary--which appears with none of her plays, Parks' language devices underwrite the disruptive nature of her texts as Parks' works toward rewriting traditional representations of African and African-American histories.

Individuals versed in African-American vernacular are also at times hard-pressed to recognize Parks' neologisms and further challenged by the complexities of her texts. They, as any reader, might struggle at first for the possible meaning, for example, in discussions between George and her Aunt Lily on the Art of Love in *Devotees in the Garden of Love*. From a high hill the women observe suitors ThisOne and ThatOne in battle for the fair hand of George:

GEORGE: They may not be peacing by morning through. My match by morning may not be made. Madame Odelia Pandahr says there arnt 2 suitors alive more well matched than ThisOne and ThatOne. While any other suitor in thuh area of conflict would be smote right down for dead ThisOne has uh move which ThatOne counters and ThatOne has uh counter to which ThisOne always gives reply. From what Madame Odelia Pandahr says ThisOne and ThatOne are even steven one for one move for move uh perfect match.

As the battle continues the two women consider the power of Love:

LILY: Keep your eyes stucked inside them bo-nocks my sweet thing. Down theres where thuh action is.

GEORGE: It could be a protracted engagement down there. I may be sittin uhround protactedly engaged up here.--. But I think thingsll wrap theirselves up nicely.

LILY: And how come?

GEORGE: How come cuz thuh cause of Love thats how come. L-O-V-E. ThatOne could start a charge on ThisOne and ThisOne would rally back.... Cuz the cause of Love. Guns with them knives on thuh ends may run through lines and lines of thuh faithful piercing through and through and through and fingers and toes may travel to foreign countries where we aint never been. Mama Lily, puss green-slimed bile and contagion may grow from thuh wounds of the wounded seep intuh thuh ground and kill and kill and kill and kill and kill and kill and kill and thuh cannons may roar thuh wind may moan thuh sky may shake and spit fire and crack open and swallow um all up but itll all end nicely. Our word is "devotion." My match is made in heaven.



We will hold fast. Unto thuh death. We will not  
 come out all asunder. We wont flinch. How come? Cuz  
 thuh cause of Love.<sup>60</sup>

Parks' fascinating mix of archaic language and imagery with contemporary black vernacular and neovernacular produces again interrelated seepage of time, of historical experience. Her ambiguous representation of male/female relationships is an ironic appropriation of European constructs of romantic and sexual love brought to bear in the context of African-American male/female relationships. The incongruity of the synthesis is striking and mirrors the incongruous melange of archaic European vocabulary with black vernacular English.

The characters themselves also illustrate the same contradictions. For example, George, an eligible black female, sports a masculine name, yet remains a distant observer in the determination of her future. Her hope chest, her bridehead, her place settings are exaggerated symbols of her worthiness. By the end of the play, George has insisted that her name be changed to Patty. She narrates in third person that the suitor who won her hand had only his head on a platter remaining, and together he and his wife made a go of their relationship, "lived happily ever after and stuff like that. Talking back and forth."<sup>61</sup>

Parks determines here, as in her other plays, a positioning of African-American culture and language in relief to dominant notions of blackness. Like Kennedy and Shange, Parks thus produces drama that is a specialized, intense rendition of the diverse representations and experiences of

black men and women in American societies. Her work can be convincingly characterized as having contributed to the current postmodern tenor of African-American dramatic tradition. She, again like Kennedy and Shange, has become an forceful influence on the workings of black women's drama and the developing visibility of African-American women writers.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Parks, "An Equation for Black People on the Stage," *The America Play and Other Works*, (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995) 20.

<sup>2</sup> Doris Sommers, "Resisting the Heat: Menchú, Morrison, and Incompetent Readers," *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993) 407.

<sup>3</sup> Sommers, "Resisting," 408.

<sup>4</sup> Sommers, "Resisting," 408.

<sup>5</sup> Sommers, "Resisting," 409.

<sup>6</sup> Sommers, "Resisting," 412.

<sup>7</sup> Sommers, "Resisting," 412.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 53.

<sup>9</sup> Cooke, *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Achievement of Intimacy* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984) 27.

<sup>10</sup> Cooke, *Afro-American*, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Cooke, *Afro-American*, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Parks, "The Death," 105.

<sup>13</sup> Parks, "The Death," 107. <sup>13</sup> Parks, "The Death," 104.

<sup>13</sup> Parks, "Possession," *The America Play and Other Works* (New York

<sup>14</sup> Parks, "The Death," 104.

<sup>15</sup> Parks, "Possession," *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995) 4.

<sup>16</sup> Parks, "Possession," 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> Parks, "Possession," 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> Susan-Lori Parks, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World, The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995) 102. All further citations refer to this text.

- <sup>19</sup> Parks, *The Death*, 111.
- <sup>20</sup> Parks, "from Elements of Style," *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995) 9. All further citations refer to this text.
- <sup>21</sup> Parks, "from Elements," 8.
- <sup>22</sup> Parks, *The Death*, 102.
- <sup>23</sup> Parks, *The Death*, 103.
- <sup>24</sup> Parks, *The Death*, 115.
- <sup>25</sup> Parks, *The Death*, 104.
- <sup>26</sup> Gates, *Signifying*, xxv.
- <sup>27</sup> Gates, *Signifying*, 181.
- <sup>28</sup> Parks, *The Death*, 111.
- <sup>29</sup> Parks, *The Death*, 121.
- <sup>30</sup> Parks, *The Death*, 115.
- <sup>31</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, *Pickling, The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995) 94. All further citations refer to this text.
- <sup>32</sup> Parks, *Pickling*, 94.
- <sup>33</sup> Parks, *Pickling*, 95-96.
- <sup>34</sup> Parks, *Pickling*, 97-98.
- <sup>35</sup> Parks, *Pickling*, 98.
- <sup>36</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 124.
- <sup>37</sup> Parks, *Pickling*, 97.
- <sup>38</sup> Parks, "from Elements," 10.
- <sup>39</sup> Parks, "from Elements," 8-9.
- <sup>40</sup> Parks, "from Elements," 10.
- <sup>41</sup> Cooke, *Afro-American Literature*, 22.
- <sup>42</sup> Cooke, *Afro-American Literature*, 24.

<sup>43</sup> Parks, "from Elements," 8-9.

<sup>44</sup> Parks, "from Elements," 9.

<sup>45</sup> Parks, "from Elements," 9.

<sup>46</sup> Langston Hughes, "Jazz as Communication," *The Langston Hughes Reader* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1958) 494.

<sup>47</sup> Qtd. in "Jazz as Communication," 494.

<sup>48</sup> Bertolt Brecht's vision of Epic Theatre included visuals in his plays in order to comment upon and interact with text and music as they worked toward narrative and, at the same time, to undercut the illusory elements of theater; he labeled this effect of alienation in theater, *Verfremdungseffekt*.

<sup>49</sup> Parks, *Betting on the Dust Commander, The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995) 75. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>50</sup> Parks, *Betting*, 82.

<sup>51</sup> Parks, *Betting*, 82.

<sup>52</sup> Elliot Diringer, Lori Oszewski, "Critics May not Understand Oakland's Ebonic's Plan," *San Francisco Chronicle* 21 Nov. 1996, A17.

<sup>53</sup> John R. Rickford, "The Creole Origins of African American Vernacular English: Evidence from copula absence," *African American English* eds. Salikoko S. Mufwene, John R. Rickford, Guy Bailey and John Baugh (London: Routledge, 1998) 56-96.

<sup>54</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, *Imperceptible Mutabilities of the Third Kingdom, The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995) 264. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>55</sup> Parks, "from Elements of Style," 16.

<sup>56</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play, The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995) 172. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>57</sup> Parks, "from Elements of Style," 17-18.

<sup>58</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, Michele Pearce, "Introduction," *The America Play, American Theatre* 11.3 (1994): 25.

<sup>59</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, Michele Pearce, "Introduction," 25.

<sup>60</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, *Devotees in the Garden of Love, The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995) 140. All further citations refer to this text.

<sup>61</sup> Parks, *Devotees*, 156.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

According to Barbara Omolade, an acceptance and perhaps celebration of the experiences and history of black women "will fully emerge only when Black women become 'griots' speaking and creating a historical language of their own." The black writer, "reaching back to her spiritual and cultural sources, the major one, of course being Africa, with its rivers and memories," must develop the skills to create a new voice that will consistently speak to and of African-Americans and African American women.<sup>1</sup> The tradition of African-American women dramatists in the twentieth century has developed its own version of these griot voices. Flourishing in the early 1920s and again in the 1960s and 1970s and now in the 1990s, black women dramatists have proven that a space can be carved out in American drama for expressing the historical legacies of African-Americans and, significantly, African-American women.

The work of black women dramatists has not, however, developed in a vacuum. Black women writers of fiction, poetry, and criticism have shared in the gestation of a tradition that identifies and encourages black women writers as transmitters of culture. The quest is one of preservation, exploration, and growth. And an emphasis,

whether celebratory or interrogatory, consistently seems to surface in this tradition regarding the place of memory/history, cultural community, and language in the (re)cognition of varied oppressive histories of black women.

In fiction, writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Toni Cade Bambara have expressed the necessity of interpreting the black experience through the eyes of black women, not limiting themselves to just women's issues but including the dilemmas and triumphs of African-American men, women, and children. In this way they illustrate a broader perspective than many who have attempted to address the struggles of African-American people.

Historically, a restrictive emphasis on a generic struggle for liberation and economic viability formulated and dominated by men within the black community has almost completely silenced black women and their particular issues. Still, although many black women, as a result, direct their voices primarily toward black female experience, the larger community is rarely ignored. Even Alice Walker, often criticized as a black male basher, proffers the "womanist" perspective, where liberation of black women cannot occur without consideration of black men's and the black community's welfare as well.

As illustrated in this dissertation, these issues are addressed as well in the work of black women dramatists. Shange's careful exegesis, for example, of communities within

black communities--of black women, men, actors--in spell #7 recognizes the significance of the dynamics of black communities in confronting American racism.

In addition to community, African-American women's literary tradition is inextricably connected to a heightened notion of history and a celebration of heritage toward the personal within the communal. Toni Morrison, for example, argues in reference to history and the self that black art is consistently concerned with the past; she insists on a connection between the two:

when you kill the ancestor, you kill yourself. I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection.<sup>2</sup>

Morrison evokes here images of Kennedy's Sarah in *Funnyhouse* of a Negro, bereft of a healthy location in her world and attempting to negotiate her loss by refusing her heritage. Morrison's concern for connections to heritage also speaks to Shange's insistence on African survivals of dance, poetry, and music in her drama.

As with Morrison's insistence on the presence of the magical and the spiritual in black literature through "the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world," Parks in many ways iterates this vision in her insistence on rewriting history from black perspectives. She accomplishes this, for example, through images of Kin Seer regarding himself during middle passage in *Mutabilities of the*



*Third Kingdom*, or the multiple deaths and escapes of the Last Black Man in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire world*.<sup>3</sup> Black women fiction writers and critics have thus in many ways paralleled the concerns of black women dramatists in searching for their voices.

Paula Giddings argues that voice heard is necessary to establish a black female presence in black and white literature and theory which has for too long rehearsed American racist and sexist oppressions:

despite the range and significance of our history, we have been perceived as token women in Black texts and as token Blacks in the feminist ones.... Black women have had a history of their own, one that reflects their distinct concerns, values and the roles they have played as both Afro-Americans and women. And their unique status has had an impact on both racial and feminist values....<sup>4</sup>

To address this unique status, black women writers have determined to write into existence their own history and literature or, as Mary Helen Washington suggests,

these women writers have chosen to tell their stories and to use language in certain ways, and in doing so have produced art, writerly designs, which constitute a unique literary tradition.<sup>5</sup>

Black women writers have clearly expressed that their purpose has much to do with creating a unique voice for the individual as well as the community. Maya Angelou declares that

for the Black voice and any ear which can hear it.... After, and during pestilential assaults of frustration, hate, demeanings, and murders, our language continues to expand and mature. Our lives, made inadequate and estranged by the experience of malice, loathing, and hostility, are enriched by

words we use to, and with, each other. By our intonations, our modulations, our shout, our hollers.... I write because I am a Black woman, listening attentively to her talking people.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Toni Cade Bambara argues that "writing is a legitimate way, an important way to participate in the empowerment of the community that names me."<sup>7</sup> And Audre Lorde elaborates on the necessity of a black female voice for self as well as for community:

I write for myself. I write for myself and my children and for as many people as possible who can read me. When I say myself, I mean not only the Audre that inhabits my body but all those feisty, incorrigible, beautiful Black women who insist on standing up and saying *I am* and you can't wipe me out, no matter how irritating I am.... I think of my responsibility in terms of women because there are many voices for men. There are very few voices for women and particularly very few voices for Black women, speaking from the center of consciousness, for the *I am* out to the *we are*.<sup>8</sup>

These fictional and critical writers acknowledge the possibilities of empowerment of vocal and textual visibility.

The resistant possibilities of language as a tool toward visibility have been a key issue in the development of black women's literary tradition, as well. The question of the role of the vernacular in black life has often been given meaning through an insistence on or an avoidance of vernacular language as metaphor for cultural pride or as metaphor for the obsequious quest toward white societal approval. Although black women authors have most often resorted to standard English in their texts, many contemporary writers such as Morrison are interested in the role of the vernacular as one

resistant literary device offering subversive terrains for black expression. In referring to "the major characteristics of Black art," Morrison argues that one of the most important of these is "the ability to be both print and oral literature." For Gayle Jones, known for her use of black speech in novels such as *Eva's Man*,

when you write a story..., you have to be able to hear other people's voices and you have to hear your own voice.... I have to bring the written things into the oral mode before I can deal with them.<sup>9</sup>

The oral mode for Jones becomes a "ritualized dialogue," where there is modification of

the rhythm of talk and response.... You change the rhythm of the talk and response and you change the rhythm between the talk and response. So in ritualized dialogue, you do something to the rhythm or you do something to the words.... But both things take the dialogue out of the naturalistic realm—change its quality.<sup>10</sup>

Jones addresses here concerns with developing language to suit her artistic needs, concerns that are similar to those of Kennedy, Shange and Parks. Like Jones, these playwrights feel the need to tailor the language. Kennedy, for example, anticipates through her development of ritual litanies in her plays a tailoring of language in some ways similar to that of Jones. Through such concerns with the importance of language and of community, Kennedy, Shange and Parks join their sister-authors in the quest for strong black female voices.

However, Kennedy, Shange and Parks' interests in language are even more emphatically directed toward a quest to not only

include ritual language or vernacular, but to revise it, modify it toward the demands of a postmodern expression of African-American drama. In doing so these playwrights, by exploring the possibilities of the postmodern as a new dimension in the search to understand African-American identity and community, accomplish much that sets them apart from the work of the above mentioned authors. And in many ways these playwrights differ from each other in their examination and pursuit of the postmodern possibilities of drama.

Kennedy's early works are unique in that they emphasize individual experience, particularly black female experience, focusing on the destructive effects of racial and sexual oppressions upon bi-racial female sensibilities. Her drama intensely portrays the anguish of her characters through a development of resistant texts and experimentations with ritual and masking. Her perhaps most provocative issue concerns the manner in which her women characters' self-images are constructed by their interactions with dominant black male figures. Disruptive form and ritual language reproduce the resultant psychological disarray of Kennedy's protagonists. In addition, Kennedy uniquely approaches the parameters of African-American community by intensely portraying what such communities should not be. Alienation, fragmentation, abuse, and incest all are aspects of family and community that her characters endure. As a result, the pathologies of her

characters are the causes and consequences of communal breakdown and of the subsequent isolation of her protagonists.

On the other hand, Shange's drama focuses on the individual as he/she articulates with and within communal experience. As a result, Shange produces a more consumable, optimistic drama that emphasizes the regenerative possibilities of community. Her quasi-utopian vision of female communities united against the ravages of inter/intra-racial sexism is one strong example of an implied, though not completely naive, optimism. The dominant position of minstrel masking as a part of her work, however, convincingly suggests that Shange's vision of black community is still perceived within the constraints of American racism. Furthermore, Shange's simple visual adaptations of vernacular position her as unique in her anticipation of an enhanced role of vernacular language in a postmodern view of black drama. Through these adaptations, Shange attempts to address the sense of alienation fostered by the dominant culture's insensitivity to verbal, as well as racial/cultural, diversity of its people and attempts to displace ideological notions of ownership on the part of the reader.

Parks' vision emerges as a huge, historical landscape, configured through mythic perspectives and also emphasizing the sustaining role of community toward survival. Her drama, while also examining articulation among members of African-American communities, focuses primarily on historical

(de)constructions of black male and female identity and experience, a theme underwritten by the layered structure of her "drama of accumulation." Parks' emphasis on language pushes further the beginning experimentations of Shange and is unique in its emphatic investigation of the tensions between the vernacular and the written word and their impact on constructed realities of readers/spectators. Parks stridently develops, in her revolutionary masking of black vernacular and dramatic structure, texts inaccessible to those inside as well as outside of boundaries of that cultural domain, demanding an assertion of difference from even those familiar with black vernacular and creating effective examples of uncooperative texts.

The result of such diverse yet powerful efforts from these playwrights is the development of a postmodern African-American dramatic vision that works toward recognizing the significance of audience response in black dramatic projects and that taps the possibilities of postmodernity as it might engage African-American political and cultural experience. The disruptive nature of these women's texts is in some ways an indication of the ever-increasing awareness of the need for new venues of expression in African-American drama concerning multiply operative oppressions such as racism, sexism, cultural nationalisms, classicism. It is clear that these playwrights, Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, and Suzan-Lori Parks, have contributed to the development of a black drama

adaptive to the complexities of current political and racial environments and, as a result, have assisted in keeping the tradition of African-American drama clearly relevant and very much alive.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Omolade, *The Rising Song of African-American Women* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 105.

<sup>2</sup> Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation* (New York: Doubleday, 1984) 344.

<sup>3</sup> Morrison, "Rootedness," 495.

<sup>4</sup> Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow Company, Inc., 1984), 5-6.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Helen Washington, "Re(Visions): Black Women Writers--Their Texts, Their Readers, Their Critics," *Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds: Stories By and About Black Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1989) 6.

<sup>6</sup> Maya Angelou, "Shades and Slashes of Light," *Black Women Writers: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Doubleday, 1984) 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, "Salvation Is the Issue," *Black Women Writers: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Doubleday, 1984) 42.

<sup>8</sup> Audre Lorde, "My Words Will Be There," *Black Women Writers: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Doubleday, 1984) 42.

<sup>9</sup> Michael S. Harper, "Gayle Jones: An Interview," *Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship*, ed. Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979) 353-355.

<sup>10</sup> Harper, "Gayle Jones: An Interview," 359.



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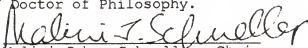
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#### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

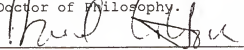
Jacqueline Wood completed her Bachelor of Arts in English and French at Ohio Wesleyan University and her Master of Arts in English at Western Kentucky University. She completed her Master of Arts in French at Florida Atlantic University in 1991. She taught as an instructor of English at Broward Community College in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida for eleven years before pursuing her doctorate at the University of Florida.



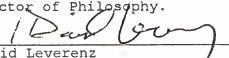
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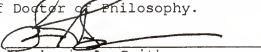
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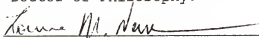
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This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Dean, Graduate School

August 1998